

EQUALITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE COMMITTEE – 20 SEPTEMBER 2021

EVIDENCE PAPER

This evidence paper outlines my priorities for the Sixth Senedd and sets out how I plan to work with Cabinet colleagues on the cross-cutting matters in my portfolio.

Addressing inequalities and achieving the Strategic Equality Plan 2020-24 objectives

The strengthening and advancement of equality and human rights has been a central focus of every Welsh Government since the beginning of devolution. This government is more resolute than ever in its focus and determination to create a fairer more equal Wales.

COVID-19 brought into focus the continuing existence of deep-rooted inequalities in our society. These inequalities have been further explored and articulated in powerful reports by the First Ministers' Socio-economic subgroup of the COVID-19 Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Advisory Group and the Disability Equality Forum.

The First Minister has been very clear that equality is at the heart of our decision making and the long term aims of the Strategic Equality Action Plan 2020-2024 will be delivered by the underpinning Race Equality, Gender Equality and LGBTQI+ Action Plans and our response to the [Locked out Report](#) (and the establishment of a ministerial led Disability Taskforce.) The recommendations from the [Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic COVID-19 Socio economic Sub Group Report](#) led to the development of the [Race Equality Action Plan: an Anti-racist Wales](#).

On 26 August the [Strengthening and advancing equality and human rights in Wales research report](#) was published. This significant piece of research was commissioned as part of the Welsh Government's commitment to developing a clear approach in Wales to ensuring equality and human rights are fully considered and protected. The research findings outline mechanisms to strengthen and advance equality and human rights in Wales, with the report including 40 recommendations for legislative, policy, guidance, or other reforms. Each recommendation includes detailed steps to progress toward the main recommendation.

Early in the new term I am meeting with ministerial colleagues to explore how the recommendations might be integrated into ongoing and future work. Important steps have already been taken in this regard. Our Programme for Government sets out our commitment to incorporate the United Nations Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Disabled People into Welsh law. Additionally, the commencement of the Socio-economic Duty in Wales in March 2021 provides a key mechanism in supporting Wales's recovery from the impact of Covid-19.

The Programme for Government includes a commitment to implement a Race Disparity Unit, alongside an Equality Data Unit, in order to provide analytical and policy capacity to drive forward on-the-ground change to tackle evidence-informed inequalities in Wales. I will also establish a Disability Disparity Unit. My officials have, and will continue to, work with stakeholders to develop an understanding of priorities for the Units following implementation.

Tackling poverty, income maximisation and benefits advice

Tackling poverty continues to be made a priority. Through the Programme for Government we have set out our commitment to improve outcomes for low income households. This includes, amongst others, continuing to support our flagship Flying Start programme; a commitment to review eligibility criteria for free school meals; and additional funding for childcare where parents are in education and training.

I am committed to driving forward this agenda and intend to use every lever at my disposal to bring about change. I continue to meet ministerial colleagues to discuss opportunities to prioritise tackling poverty in the development and delivery of their Programme for Government commitments, and within their policies and service delivery considerations. In addition, poverty will be embedded within the heart of the budget planning process (linking to the requirements of the Socio-economic Duty). This will help to focus portfolio priorities across government on those things that contribute to addressing inequalities and improving outcomes for low income households.

These discussions will focus on evidence of what works in tackling poverty. They will take on board the recommendations arising from the Child Poverty review, to ensure that Welsh Government funded programmes have maximum impact on the lives of children living in poverty. It will also be supported by findings from the research and analysis currently being undertaken by the Wales Centre for Public Policy into tackling poverty in Wales. This is considering international poverty alleviation strategies and effective poverty reduction programmes and policies.

In addition, throughout the summer I met and engaged with key tackling poverty programmes, stakeholders and those with lived experience to gain insight into the opportunities and challenges for example the Swansea Poverty Truth Commission and the Anti-Poverty Coalition. Collectively, this analysis will help to inform the design and implementation of future actions in Wales.

Since the start of the pandemic, our focus has been on increasing household income, reducing essential living costs and building financial resilience (“income maximisation”). The [progress report of the Child Poverty – Income Maximisation Plan](#) summarises the outcomes of a number of pilot programmes. The report demonstrates positive progress in a number of key areas, which we will now build upon.

The introduction of the Single Advice Fund (SAF) in January 2020 has ensured the Welsh Government is grant funding strategically planned, cost effective and integrated advice services that are helping to meet the increasing demand for access to advice services. The benefit advice services delivered through the SAF are invaluable in helping people to navigate through the benefit system to better understand what they may be entitled to and how to claim. Everyone who accesses the SAF services is offered a ‘welfare benefit entitlement check’, regardless of the presenting problem they contacted the SAF for help with e.g. housing, employment problem etc. In the last financial year, SAF benefit advice services helped people to claim over £40 million of additional welfare benefit income.

Throughout March 2021 we delivered the first national benefits take up campaign in Wales which resulted in an additional £651,504 being claimed by those entitled to benefits. Building upon the success of this campaign, we will deliver another national campaign this

autumn. From October 2020 to March 2021 we also ran six Test and Learn pilots that targeted tailored messages and support to encourage benefit take-up amongst groups least likely to be claiming all the financial support they are entitled to. The pilots engaged with 1,440 households providing advice and support to resolve more than 6,800 issues. The pilots supported these households to claim additional income of £2,468,052. An additional allocation of funding from the Covid reserves will enable the projects to operate at the same capacity throughout the whole of this financial year.

In May 2021, working collaboratively with local authorities we developed and published a [Best Practice Toolkit](#). This collates 'what works' in helping to simplify and streamline the application process for devolved benefits making them more accessible to people in need of this support.

Debt related issues

The Welsh Government welcomed the decision by the UK Government to transfer a share of the UK Financial Levy, as this has enabled debt advice services in Wales to be integrated alongside the other social welfare advice services we commission within the Single Advice Fund (SAF). Our share of the levy has increased year on year. In 2019 -20 our total share was £2.45m; in 2020-21 we received £3.4m and in 2021-22 our share is just over £4m.

In the last financial year, debt advice services delivered through the SAF helped over 18,000 households to manage problem debt of over £8 million and, most importantly, put their finances on a more sustainable footing.

Covid-19 has put household finances across Wales under enormous strain and many people have been left struggling with debts accrued during the pandemic. We have established a Debt Task Group with a membership of key internal and external partners. The Group has been asked to recommend initiatives and policies that will support people across Wales who are struggling to maintain their financial commitments to repay their debts in an affordable way, avoid enforcement action and offer sustainable pathways out of debt.

Officials worked closely with HM Treasury as the UK Government policy for a 'debt respite scheme' was developed. The first part of the scheme, Breathing Space, was introduced in May 2021 and people in Wales struggling with debt can now get legal protection from creditors increasing their debt and from taking enforcement action. Officials will continue to work with HM Treasury to ensure the second part of the scheme, the Statutory Debt Repayment Plan, aligns with the specific needs of people in Wales who, because of the pandemic, are struggling with problem debt.

Basic Income pilot

We are developing options for a Basic Income pilot involving people leaving care, focused on how the pilot could be designed to support those in the greatest need. There is a lot of very complex work to do designing the pilot and working out how it will be implemented and measured. It's important that we get it right. A Steering Group and an Operational Group have been established to ensure a cross-government approach. An internal monitoring and evaluation group has also been established to produce a detailed Outcomes and Evaluation framework which will sit alongside the development of the pilot. We have actively engaged

with countries that have piloted approaches to basic income, in order to learn lessons and embed this learning into the proposed pilot. As part of the process we will be listening to key stakeholders and experts as we build the model, and to contribute to the ongoing development and evaluation of this work. My officials are currently in the process of modelling a number of options for the pilot, which will allow us to make an informed decision about what can be achieved in terms of feasibility, and affordability. I am meeting with officials shortly and they will brief the First Minister and me on progress to date, I hope I will soon be in a position to provide you with more details of how the pilot will be implemented and measured.

Fair Work Commission

We are using our powers, policy levers and influence to progress the recommendations of the Fair Work Commission. We established the Social Care Fair Work Forum and its associated working groups which seek to improve working conditions in social care and we are using the Forum to inform our approach to delivering our commitment to pay social care workers the Real Living Wage.

Workplace health and safety has been radically altered by COVID-19 and we responded to this by creating the national Health and Safety Forum. This has brought together trade unions, the main employer bodies and those responsible for enforcement to share their work and collective experience in helping to keep workplaces safe. We have teamed up with our social partners to deliver campaigns to strengthen knowledge and understanding of workplace rights and responsibilities, including in relation to Health and Safety.

Working across the Welsh Government, we are using levers such as the Economic Contract and the Code of Practice on Ethical Employment in Supply Chains to encourage fairer work practices and we have partnered with Cynnal Cymru, as the Living Wage accreditation body in Wales, to help them promote and encourage further adoption of the Real Living Wage. In addition, we are taking steps to build and communicate the case for fair work and its benefits for workers, employers and wider society and we are engaging social partners in efforts to champion fair work and share best practice.

We are strengthening the social partnership approach as a key mechanism through which we can make workplaces fairer, safer and better for all. We have already announced that we will be bringing forward the Social Partnership and Public Procurement Bill shortly, which, if passed, will introduce new social partnership, socially responsible procurement and fair work duties.

Finally, in line with the Fair Work Commission recommendations to influence in the non-devolved areas, we continue to call on the UK Government to bring forward its promised Employment Bill and to commit additional resources to enforcement, so that workers have the statutory rights and protections they deserve.

Criminal Justice

We are pursuing the devolution of policing and the wider criminal justice system. The First Minister has written to the UK Government requesting the commencement of discussions on the recommendations of the Thomas Commission. However, while criminal justice remains reserved we will continue to do everything we can within our areas of responsibility

to support its effective operation. We are also working with Police and Crime Commissioners, Welsh police forces, and British Transport Police to deliver, in this financial year, the Programme for Government commitment to maintain funding of 500 Police Community Support Officers and expand their number by 100.

Throughout the public health crisis we have worked closely with HM Prison and Probation, Youth Custody Service, Youth Justice Board, Ministry of Justice, NHS Wales and Public Health Wales (PHW) to manage the outbreaks and mitigate the impact of the virus, balancing the needs of community health, with the health and well-being of both adult and young offenders. Whilst robust restrictions within both the secure estate and probation services were necessary to reduce the transmission of the virus and save lives, we have worked closely with partners to ensure those critical services integral to the rehabilitation of offenders remained accessible.

Through positive collaboration the testing of adult and young offenders upon arrival at all Welsh prisons, Youth Offending Institutions and Secure Children's Homes was put in place. Working with Public Health Wales we implemented a testing protocol for staff in our Secure Children's Home. A national contact tracing protocol was established to minimise transmission across the secure estate in Wales and the vaccination programme continues to be rolled out at pace in prisons, in line with the community programme.

In March last year I made the difficult decision to pause work on the Female and Youth Offending Blueprints. This was in response to COVID-19 and the need for all delivery partners to re-deploy resources. On 1 July 2020 work resumed on the delivery of both Blueprints. An assessment of implementation plans has now been undertaken to review project deliverables and refresh timescales. Updated implementation plans have been produced in consultation with our key partners and have been published highlighting progress to date and outlining our future work programme.

As part of this year's budget, we are allocating a further £500,000 to the Blueprint programme to support projects which strengthen links between women in prison and their children through the 'Visiting Mums', and help progress the delivery of trauma informed practice to Youth Justice Practitioners. This additional investment in the Blueprints helps provide meaningful multi-generational improvements in the lives of some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

Future Generations Commissioner and work in relation to the Well-being of Future Generations Act

I meet regularly with the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales (FGCfW) on the work under the Well-being of Future Generations framework. In June 2021 we published our [Programme for Government](#) which included our well-being objectives to maximise our contribution to the well-being goals over this Government term. Our Well-being of Future Generations strategic implementation framework continues to guide and informs our work to carry out and promote sustainable development and our duties under the Well-being of Future Generations Act.

This year we established a Well-being of Future Generations national stakeholder fora, launched a new campaign page to improve awareness of the Act, delivered two Future

Generations Xchange events and developed a blog platform to keep stakeholders engaged and up to date on key activities.

In February, we published a [roadmap for 2021](#) setting an accelerated timescale for delivery of national milestones, indicators, and the Future Trends Report under the banner of *Shaping Wales' Future* programme.

On 1 September I launched a [consultation on national milestones for Wales](#) that will shape future action towards achieving the shared well-being goals. It proposes nine national milestones that will assist Welsh Ministers in assessing progress towards the well-being goals and also seeks views on potential gaps in the current set of national well-being indicators that have been highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The consultation will run until 26 October 2021.

Over the past 18 months the Well-being of Future Generations Act has received considerable scrutiny on its effectiveness as a legislative framework to improve Wales' sustainability. In the autumn we will publish our response to the recommendations outlined in three key reports: the Future Generations Commissioner's Report, the Auditor General's Report, and the inquiry by the Public Accounts Committee.

We have agreed a shared action plan with the Future Generations Commissioner to align activities internationally, to utilise connections at the United Nations and platforms such as the World Expo and COP26 to promote and demonstrate how a well-being of future generations approach can help drive positive action on the world's greatest problems.

Settled status

In July 2019, the Welsh Government announced a package of free support to help EU citizens prepare for the UK to leave the EU and to help them apply for pre-settled or settled status. This support continues to ensure that we reach as many EU Citizens as possible who, for whatever reason, may not yet have applied to the EU Settlement Scheme. More recently the Welsh Government has confirmed continued funding to enable immigration specialist lawyers Newfields Law, Citizens Advice and third sector organisation Settled up until 31 December 2021

This continued provision will ensure that EU citizens' can continue to access free advice and support to help them gain pre-settled or settled status. As of 30 June 2021, 96,800 EUSS applications had been submitted by EU citizens living in Wales. The UK Government is due to publish the next quarterly statistical analysis of applications made to the scheme later this month; the Welsh Government will use this data to inform the support we continue to provide going forward.

Unfortunately, due to historic free movement, the UK Government does not know exactly how many EU citizens' in the UK are eligible to apply for EUSS and this is why it is not possible to accurately calculate the number of EU citizens in Wales who did not apply for pre-settled or settled status by the 30 June deadline. However, estimates by Local Authorities predicted that there was approximately 95,000 EU citizens in Wales and recent application numbers have now far exceeded that figure.

For those with reasonable grounds for missing the deadline, there is still time to make an application and we will continue to support those individuals. Further information can be found on the [Preparing Wales](#) and [EUSSWales](#) websites.

Afghan Resettlement

The Welsh Government is committed to creating a [Nation of Sanctuary](#) for refugees and asylum seekers arriving in Wales. We want to ensure they are supported to rebuild their lives and make a full contribution to Welsh society

My thoughts are with those affected by the changes in Afghanistan, including anyone who is living here as a veteran, former interpreter or refugee who may be concerned about friends and family members back home. The First Minister and I met and listened to key stakeholders across Wales, including representatives of the Afghan community, to look at how we can all work collaboratively to provide the best support possible for those fleeing Afghanistan. We are working with local authorities and the Home Office to try to identify accommodation that could be utilised to help bring those who have supported our country to safety as quickly as possible. You can find my latest Written Statement on the situation [here](#) and it is my intention to deliver an Oral Statement to the Senedd with an update in September.