

## **Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb hwn i ymgynghoriad y [Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg ar Flaenoriaethau'r Chweched Senedd](#)**

**This response was submitted to the [Children, Young People and Education Committee](#) consultation on [Sixth Senedd Priorities](#)**

### **CYPE SP 84**

**Ymateb gan: Sean O'Neill, Cadeirydd, Rhwydwaith Dileu Tlodi Plant Cymru**

**Response from: Sean O'Neill, Chair, End Child Poverty Network Cymru (ECPN Cymru)**

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Beth yn eich barn chi yw'r prif flaenoriaethau neu'r materion y dylai'r Pwyllgor eu hystyried yn ystod y Chweched Senedd? Os oes modd, nodwch eich barn o ran sut y gallai'r Pwyllgor fynd i'r afael â hyn.

What do you consider to be the main priorities or issues that the Committee should consider during the Sixth Senedd? Where possible, please set out your view about how the Committee could address them.

### **Theme 1: School-age education**

**Theme 3: Health and well-being, including social care (as they relate to children and young people)**

**Theme 4: Children and young people**

The **End Child Poverty Network Cymru** (est. 2004) is the national child poverty network of professional organisations focused on the elimination of child poverty in Wales. Together with our partners, we have actively campaigned for legislation, policy and programmes to be put in place to help prevent and mitigate the impact of poverty on children, young people and their families. We continue to actively contribute to policy, practice and scrutiny opportunities by working with government, public bodies and Welsh Parliament.

Our submission has been drafted to complement responses from member organisations<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Members of the ECPN Cymru are representatives from Children in Wales, NSPCC Cymru, Child Poverty Action Group, The Children Society, NEA Wales, Save the Children Wales, UWTSO, Action for Children, Barnardo's Cymru, WLGA (observers), Citizens Advice, Oxfam Cymru, Public Health Wales, Shelter Cymru, the Buttle Trust, The Princes Trust Cymru, TUC Wales (observers) and the Office of the Children's Commissioner for Wales (observers).

## Child Poverty

We ask that the Committee include the following in their forward workplan

- Undertake an inquiry into child poverty in Wales, taking into account the ECPN 10 point manifesto and the priorities identified through this submission and from responses from ECPN member organisations
- Engage with other relevant Senedd Committees, notably the ESJ Committee, to ensure that any future inquiries in relation to equalities, human rights and social justice take full account of the lived experience of children and families in low-income.
- Ensure that in all future inquiries, that the duties placed upon all Welsh Ministers and named public bodies to both have 'due regard' to the UNCRC in all of their actions, and to take steps to tackle child poverty under existing legislation, are being met.

### Context

Child poverty is a child rights violation. Despite 2021 marking 30 years since the UK Government ratified the UNCRC, successive periodic reports from the UN have raised concerns regarding the high, and sustained growth in the number of children in poverty. In 2018, the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights following a fact-finding visit to Wales and other parts of the UK, described the situation as a 'national disgrace'. More recently, the Children's Commissioner for Wales has identified tackling child poverty as one of the top 5 key tasks for the new Welsh Government (WG).

Child poverty remains stubbornly high.

- Wales has the worst child poverty rate of all the UK nations, with 31% of children living below the poverty line – a 3% increase from the previous year<sup>2</sup>
- Even before the pandemic, almost 200,000 children were living in poverty in Wales, with a higher proportion of children affected than at any point in the past 5 years.
- This equates to almost 9 children in a classroom of every 30 pupils
- Wales has witnessed the biggest increase in child poverty levels compared to the other 3 UK nations
- Children are more significantly likely to live in income poverty compared to other household types
- 34% of families in Wales where the youngest child is under 5 are in poverty<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Stats Wales (2021), [Relative Income Poverty 2019-20](#)

<sup>3</sup> Nuffield Foundation (2021) Changing patterns of poverty in early childhood

- Some children are disproportionately at greater risk of being in a low-income family compared to their peers, dependent on their characteristics or family structure (for example, children living in single parent families)<sup>4</sup>
- Almost ¾ of all children in poverty live in a household where someone is working, which is a significant increase over the past few years, with low pay, insecure employment, high housing rental and childcare costs amongst the factors pushing more working families into poverty<sup>5 6</sup>
- The poorest children already start school 10 months behind children in more affluent families
- Whilst at least one in five children are living below the poverty line in every local authority in Wales, there are significant concentrations in certain parts of the country<sup>7</sup>

Children in low-income families are now on average living further below the poverty line than they were five years ago, experiencing poorer outcomes and greater hardship across a range of indicators.<sup>8</sup>

The economic impact of the pandemic, especially for children in low-income households, has served to exacerbate pre-existing inequalities<sup>9</sup>. Many families who were previously struggling have experienced declines in incomes through temporary/permanent reductions in working hours and job losses, coinciding with increased living costs.

- 7 out of 10 families receiving social security benefits had to cut back on essentials such as food, utilities, clothing and activities for children as a result of the impact of the pandemic.<sup>10</sup>
- A record number of referrals were received by foodbanks, with the Trussell Trust delivering over 54,000 emergency food parcels for children in Wales.<sup>11</sup>
- Over 22% of children in Wales are now eligible for Free School Meals, which rises to almost 1 in 3 children in more deprived areas, with eligibility at its highest level for 20 years<sup>12</sup>.
- Growing number of families are in rent, energy bills and council tax arrears<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2020) [Poverty in Wales 2020](#)

<sup>5</sup> Stats Wales (2020) [Children in relative income poverty by economic status of household](#).

<sup>6</sup> Chwarae Teg & Bevan Foundation (2019), [Trapped: Poverty amongst women in Wales today](#)

<sup>7</sup> ECP (2021) [Local child poverty indicators 2019/20](#)

<sup>8</sup> Child Poverty Action Group (2020) [Dragged Deeper: how families are falling further and further below the poverty line](#)

<sup>9</sup> Bevan Foundation (2020) [Reducing the impact of Coronavirus on Poverty in Wales](#)

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation & Save the Children (2020) [A lifeline for our children: Strengthening the social security system for families with children during this pandemic](#)

<sup>11</sup> Trussell Trust (2021) [End of Year stats](#)

<sup>12</sup> Wales Online (2021) [More than one in five pupils in Wales receiving free school meals as thousands more become eligible during the pandemic.](#)

<sup>13</sup> Citizens Advice (2020) [Coronavirus debts: Estimating the size of lockdown arrears in Wales](#)

- More households are in receipt of Universal Credit, and almost 209,000 Covid related payment were made through the WG Discretionary Assistance Fund<sup>14</sup>

The 'toxic combination' of the proposed ending of the Universal Credit £20 uplift and furlough arrangements, and rise in energy prices<sup>15</sup> are expected to aggravate the situation further.

### Child & Family Poverty Survey Report 2021

ECPN worked in partnership with Children in Wales who released the findings from their report in September 2021 following extensive engagement with predominantly front-line professionals and children/young people. The report identifies the main poverty related issues families presented with, when approaching services for support and allows for a comparison to be made with previous years<sup>16</sup>.

The analysis shows a sharp increase in families falling into poverty since the pandemic began, struggling to meet everyday costs, with the main issues reported by practitioners being the impact of the benefit system, debt, childcare costs, food insecurity and employment instability/salary levels, leading to an increase in stress and anxiety. Children and young people themselves identified the detrimental impact poverty had and called for and extension of free school meals, an increase in salary levels and a need for greater equity for children and young people living in poverty.

### Current approach in Wales

Whilst we applaud recent attempts and investment made by the previous WG to mitigate the impact of poverty for children and families during the pandemic, there is an urgent need to develop an ambitious, yet achievable roadmap which would set forth the priority actions underway and planned to tackle child poverty during this Senedd term.

ECPN published a Manifesto ahead of the recent Senedd elections, which set out 10 priority actions for the new administration<sup>17</sup>.

Amongst our calls were the following

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<sup>14</sup> WG (2021) [Summary data about coronavirus and the response to it:26 May 2021](#)

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.ofgem.gov.uk/publications/record-gas-prices-drive-price-cap-ps139-customers-encouraged-contact-supplier-support-and-switch-better-deal-if-possible>

<sup>16</sup> Children in Wales (2021) [Child and Family Poverty Survey Report](#)

<sup>17</sup> ECPN Cymru (2021) [Manifesto for the 2021 Senedd Elections](#)

- **Publish a revised statutory Child Poverty Strategy with Delivery Plan, with clear measureable and ambitious milestones, supported by transparent monitoring arrangements**

The Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010 ('Measure') continues to provide the legislative framework for tackling child poverty in Wales, and places a duty on Welsh Ministers to set objectives.

The current statutory Child Poverty Strategy<sup>18</sup> was published in December 2015 with an Assessment of Progress<sup>19</sup> published the following year. There is a requirement to report against the objectives every three years, although this is the most recent progress report. Despite calls from ECPN, there has been no review of the Strategy nor any delivery plan to drive its implementation. The current Strategy is dated and in urgent need of revision to reflect the present context. There is no explicit reference to tackling child poverty in the Programme for Government, and only one reference to poverty (in respect of fuel). It is not clear how the current Strategy is being utilised as a planning tool to address the growing levels of child poverty in Wales.

- **Ensure that existing statutory duties placed upon relevant public bodies to tackle child poverty through the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act are being sufficiently delivered, and that robust monitoring arrangements are in place to assess the quality and implementation of local Well Being Plans**

Named Welsh public bodies have a statutory duty to take action to tackle child poverty through the Measure, with complimentary duties on local authorities to report such actions through the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. Public Service Boards (PSBs) as the statutory local partnership bodies, are required to undertake wellbeing assessment and develop wellbeing plans as the vehicle for public bodies to collectively discharge the child poverty duty under the Act. In 2018, ECPN undertook an analysis of wellbeing plans, with only a minority of plans identifying specific objectives for addressing poverty and inequality.

Following enactment in March 2021 of Part 1 of the Socio-economic duty prescribed through the Equality Act 2010, named public bodies must now have due regard of the need to reduce inequalities of outcome resulting from socio-economic disadvantage when taking decisions of a strategic nature<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> <https://gov.wales/docs/dsjlg/publications/150327-child-poverty-strategy-walesv2-en.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> <https://gov.wales/docs/dsjlg/publications/cyp/161212-child-poverty-strategy-progress-report-2016-en.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> WG (2021) [A More Equal Wales: Socio-economic Duty: Statutory Guidance](#)

- **Increase the eligibility threshold for Free School Meals to ensure that all children whose parents are in receipt of Universal Credit are entitled during the school term and throughout the school holidays, and take steps towards universal entitlement for all.**

Whilst we have expressed our support for the steps taken by the previous WG to provide Free School Meals (FSMs) to eligible children during school holidays and during periods of school closures to help mitigate financial hardship, tackle hunger and to help children access a nutritious meal, fundamental shortcomings with the system remain.

The FSM allowance scheme remains a highly valued component in the drive to mitigate the impact of poverty and tackle health inequalities. However, the income threshold criteria restricts eligibility and take up. Due to the economic impact of the pandemic, it's estimated that 42% of children in poverty cannot access FSMs<sup>21</sup>, with Wales remaining the UK nation that excludes the highest proportion of children in poverty, due to the lack of universal provision and restrictive eligibility criteria.

The allowance is also insufficient to cover the full cost of a healthy meal, leading to some children going hungry or choosing food of low nutritional value. The case for reform, the costs involved and how current barriers can be overcome have been set out<sup>22</sup>. Though we are encouraged by recent commitments to review the eligibility criteria, we are awaiting the necessary detail.

- **The Childcare system is not fulfilling its full potential, with barriers prevailing in relation to sufficiency, accessibility, quality and cost. All children should have access to high quality childcare, as part of a coherent and integrated system, with the eligibility criteria for the Childcare Offer and Flying Start childcare widened to ensure that all children in poverty can access free childcare**

Some families can access some form of free or subsidised childcare, but availability is limited, eligibility is restrictive, with barriers prevailing in relation to sufficiency, accessibility, quality and cost. Whilst an evaluation of the Childcare Offer found that it had helped low-income families the most, calls for it to be extended to non-working parents have yet to be accepted. Whilst there is a great deal of support for the Flying Start programme, around 44% of children from income deprived backgrounds are not eligible as they live outside pre-defined geographical areas<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> [https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/files/policypost/Fixing\\_Lunch.pdf](https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/files/policypost/Fixing_Lunch.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> Bevan Foundation (2021) [Why expanding free school meals is achievable](#)

<sup>23</sup> Save the Children (2018) [Little Pieces, Big Picture](#)

Providing a national high quality integrated ECEC system should be a key component of COVID-19 recovery to help prevent disadvantaged children from falling further behind developmentally and educationally.

We are encouraged to see a commitment to expand the work around **income maximisation** and the single advice fund, which we hope will provide a more streamlined approach for families accessing financial support.

We also welcome the commitment to pilot **Universal Basic Income** in Wales, and would wish to see a robust evaluation measuring the impact of UBI on reducing child poverty and delivering improvements to the wellbeing outcomes of children. As the pilot will focus on a cohort of care experienced children, it is important that support for all care leavers remains a priority, and we urge the Committee to review the effectiveness of current support as they transition to living with greater independence<sup>24</sup>

We very much look forward to working with members of the Committee again during this Senedd term and happy to be contacted on any aspect of our work.

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<sup>24</sup> This means looking at what current support is effective and ineffective; gaps in provision; and how those gaps could be addressed