

## The Children's Society

### **Finance Committee – Draft budget submission from The Children's Society**

#### *Financial support for care-experienced young people*

As part of a budget for the next financial year, we at The Children's Society are calling for more funding towards financial support for care-experienced young people in Wales.

It is crucial that young people who have left care are provided with support and guidance as they transition to living with greater independence, which is a time and process that can be exciting for the young person, but that also can induce anxiety. There are several factors involved with this process that need to be considered, such as managing money and accessing benefits; accessing or continuing with education or training; finding and securing housing; and the ability to engage in activities to help with wellbeing. In recent years, support that should be in place for young people who are care experienced has garnered a lot of attention both at national and local levels.

In 2016, the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act came into force, which requires local authorities to prepare a pathway plan for a child who is 16 and who are looked after, to “set out the actions which are necessary to support the young person make a successful transition to adulthood and greater independence,” ([Code of Practice, Part 6, p.8](#)), and which require review once the young person has left care. As of April 2019, young people in Wales up to the age of 25 and who have left care are exempt from paying council tax. This policy is crucial for removing from young people who are care experienced a financial cost that can be significant, and giving them the space to transition to living with greater independence.

Additionally, in 2017 the Welsh Government launched the St David's Day Fund, which provided to local authorities £1 million to support young people who have left care to access opportunities to help them transition to life with greater independence. This funding was doubled in 2019/20, and in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Welsh Government updated its guidance to prioritise support for care leavers “[who may be experiencing financial hardship due to income loss, difficulty with tenancy agreements, food and other basic living necessities.](#)”

We also welcome other forms of support available to young people who are care experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the Protection from eviction (Wales) Regulations as part of the Coronavirus Act 2020, and the Tenancy Hardship

Grant. It also is welcoming to see the First Minister's intention to trail a Basic Income pilot with a cohort of care leavers.

Whilst it is important to recognise the commitment and action over recent years to support young people who are care experienced, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects for some time to come, we believe it is appropriate to evaluate the effectiveness of this support; to find gaps in current provision; and to consider how support could be improved.

One way in which greater support could be offered to young people who are care experienced who are in need of emergency assistance is easier access to the Discretionary Assistance Fund (DAF). In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, we welcomed Welsh Government's additional investment of £11 million to the Fund, as well as making more flexible its criteria for accessing Emergency Assistance Payments (EAPs), one of the two grant types offered by the DAF, such as being able to be awarded up to five grants per year. This increased flexibility has been extended to 31 March 2022, however the impact of COVID-19 will not end by that date.

The impacts of the pandemic will be felt for some time, and those who are particularly vulnerable to financial hardship, such as care-experienced young people, will not be able to use the greater flexibility for accessing the DAF to respond to an emergency at the end of this financial year. In response to this, as well as making the case for these DAF flexibilities to be extended, we are urging Welsh Government to examine how accessible the DAF has been to care-experienced young people during the pandemic, to examine what changes could be made to the DAF to ensure that it can be accessed with ease by care-experienced young people, and allocate the funding necessary to achieve this. This should be for both EAPs and Independence Assistance Payments (IAPs), the latter of which is a DAF grant used to help a service user to live independently in a property he is moving into, and can be used to purchase, for example, white goods or furniture. IAPs could serve as an important form of support for a care-experienced young person who is moving into living with greater independence.

We urge the Finance Committee to examine the funding allocated to the DAF for the next financial year, so as to ensure that it is resourced to continue to meet the needs of people facing financial hardship.

As well as the DAF, we encourage the Finance Committee to examine the resource provided to Regional Advice Networks. These Networks were established at the beginning of 2020, which involves six networks across Wales working with services users to offer information, advice, and guidance on issues such as accessing benefits, money and debt, housing, employment, and immigration. Although we welcome the establishment of these networks, it is unclear how accessible they are to groups such as care-experienced young people, and whether social services have established links with these networks so as to streamline the process of a care-experienced young person accessing a Network's services, and to involve the Networks in the process of preparing the young person towards living with greater independence. We would argue that these Networks could play a vital role in

providing care-experienced young people with the financial advice and support they need, and we would urge the Finance Committee to scrutinise the resource allocated to these Networks.

### *Measuring children and young people's wellbeing*

'Well-being' is used to refer to a range of things in everyday life, such as being happy, not being ill, feeling fulfilled and being financially secure. Successive Welsh Governments have emphasised the importance of improving well-being, having introduced major pieces of legislation which provide a framework for improving well-being in Wales and making well-being a key element of the new curriculum.

Two key pieces of legislation that place duties on public bodies in Wales to promote well-being are the Social Services and Well-being Act and the Well-being of Future Generations Act. While it is welcome that these major pieces of legislation exist, the well-being goals that the Acts aim to achieve focus on 'objective well-being' – that is, access to education, educational attainment, housing, access to rights, and access to work and training. These are important goals, however they do not take into account the importance of subjective elements of well-being, meaning how children feel about their lives – for example, whether they feel safe where they live or whether they enjoy school.

In this year's Good Childhood Report, we provide the following estimates of how children in Wales feel about difference aspects of their lives:

<b>Measures where mean scores for children aged 10 to 15 were found to be sig lower in 2018-19 than 2009-10:</b>	<b>Estimated number of children in Wales</b>
Low happiness with life as a whole in UK: 6.7%	14,000
Low happiness with friends in UK: 3.4%	7,000
Low happiness with appearance in UK: 14.4%	30,000
Low happiness with school in UK: 11.9%	24,000

We are able to learn a great deal more about children and young people's lives by asking them about these aspects and how they impact their lives. Good policy requires good evidence and an absence of data on children's subjective well-being remains a barrier to improving children's lives. Whilst children are required to learn about how to look after their well-being, policymakers in Wales do not know how children feel about their lives and what they need to help them to live a fulfilling life and achieve their ambitions in the difficult times ahead.

Welsh Government needs to prioritise improving data on children's subjective well-being. This could have positive implications for the development and implementation of policy relating to education, public health, social care, planning and housing at national and local levels. Importantly it could help provide a consistent objective of policy and spending decisions and a narrative on children and young people for Welsh Government – to improve children's well-being.

We urge the Committee to scrutinise Welsh Government's current funding proposals in the draft budget for measuring young people's wellbeing; whether they are seeking to develop and expand current activity on gathering data on young people's wellbeing; and if so, whether it will be expanded to all children and young people in Wales.

I hope that this is useful, but please let me know if you have any questions or would like any additional information – I am contactable via

