

Jenny Rathbone MS
Chair, Equality and Social Justice

10 October 2023

Child Poverty

Dear Jenny,

Thank you for inviting members of our Committee to participate in your current work on the Welsh Government's Draft Child Poverty Strategy for Wales 2023. Such invites enable us to make connections and share relevant evidence to help strengthen each others work. It also helps maximise the impact of individual pieces of evidence.

My involvement in your work has enabled us to identify some issues that we wanted to bring to your attention and which we hope will be useful to your deliberations.

Earlier this year, we launched our inquiry asking whether disabled children and young people have equal access to education and childcare. The scope of the inquiry covers all childcare and statutory school provision from 0-16, and encompasses neurodiversity; physical, sensory or learning disabilities.

Alongside our formal written and oral evidence, we have been speaking to families more informally. Both through visits to special educational needs schools, and to the Serennu Centre in Newport and ASD Rainbows in Mountain Ash. We have also been bringing examples from our work as individual MS.

Our Citizen Engagement team have conducted over 30 family interviews covering all areas in Wales. While we are still finalising the summary note of this work, we can share with you some of the relevant stories. We have been hearing very powerful testimonies from children, young people and their

families of the impact unequal access to education and childcare has on every aspect of their lives, and the longer term impacts this unequal access can have.

While we are still continuing to gather evidence on this inquiry, we wanted to share some of the information we have gathered so far which is relevant to your child poverty work. This includes the impact a lack of accessible childcare and school provision can have on a parent / carers' ability to work, as well as the additional costs that have to be met by these families.

While we have gathered a range of evidence on this issue, it was not a specific strand of our terms of reference. It is therefore possible that if this had been included in the terms of reference, we would have gathered even more information. However, the fact that this has become a clear theme throughout the evidence suggests it is a big issue for children, young people and their families.

We will also be writing to the Minister for the Economy and Minister for Social Justice on these issues, but we wanted to ensure that the relevant evidence could be taken into account for your current work. We will also copy you into the future correspondence to these Ministers.

Barriers preventing parents and carers from working

We have a number of personal testimonies from families who are either unable to work at all or cannot work the number of hours they would like because they cannot access the right type of childcare. This issue continues for many families as the child gets older and goes to school.

Accessing inclusive childcare

We heard powerful testimony from a parent who worked in paediatric nursing, who is currently on a career break from a job they love because they have been able to secure appropriate childcare. When they did eventually find some childcare, they were unable to increase the hours, despite being willing to pay for this themselves. The parent continues to be unable to work because they now cannot secure wrap-round provision from the school nursery provision.¹

Mudiad Meithrin quoted a single parent who "had to stop working because there was no funding available by now for her child with intensive needs to attend wraparound care on school premises". This parent said that it was easier when their daughter was younger but "now I cannot work because there isn't suitable childcare or anywhere that offers wrap around care for her school". The parent has described the loss of work as a "double blow" because of both the financial and mental health impacts.²

¹ [CYPE Committee, Note from Sparkle Focus Group, 15 September 2023](#)

² [Written evidence, AEC 51 Mudiad Meithrin](#)

Even in those instances where childcare is secured, there can still be issues. One parent described securing a childcare place. There was a number of successful settling in sessions, yet the day before the childcare started, the provider told them they could not support the child. The parent said she was fortunate her employer was supportive but flagged both the practical and emotional impacts of losing out on a childcare placement the day before it was due to start.³

Mudiad Meithrin highlighted the impact staffing issues for childcare providers can have on being able to provide regular and sustainable childcare. They said parents had told them that staffing was often the reason their children couldn't attend as regularly as other children, and that this inconsistency "will cause problems for working parents / carers..."⁴

One of the parents who took part in our family interviews described how childcare did not work out for their family:

"... I struggle to find a place that can deal with his needs [...] not a lot of places can do that [...] I tried child care and he was there twice and they just couldn't make it work, I had to keep picking him up."⁵

We have heard of the struggle to juggle working responsibilities, and the pressure this places on families. One parent told us that their son who is eligible for 12 hours of early years education, only receives 5 hours, and in terms of childcare, is entitled to 17 hours but gets nothing:

"I am left doing a full time job on 5 hours childcare a week. ...is missing out on the early years foundation phase he's entitled to. He spends large parts of his days underestimated in front of screens as I have no other way of keeping him occupied so he doesn't cause disturbance while I take work calls, many of which are of a sensitive nature. I work with victims of domestic violence and modern day slavery.

As a full time working parent I am reaching crisis point. I have no family members who can care for... I cannot use a childminder as... is impulsive around roads and runs very fast and there is a high risk he would run into a road and a childminder be unable to catch him. I own my own home with a mortgage. I cannot stop work as won't be entitled to benefits."⁶

Stakeholders also raised concerns about limited inclusive childcare provision. The Royal College of Occupational Therapists said:

³ [CYPE Committee, Note from Sparkle Focus Group, 15 September 2023](#)

⁴ [Written evidence, AEC.51 Mudiad Meithrin](#)

⁵ CYPE Citizen Engagement (published note to follow)

⁶ [Written evidence, AEC.04, Individual](#)

*"Our members are concerned that private nurseries are difficult for children with special education needs and disabilities (SEND) to access to enable parents to go to work. They suggest there is inequitable access to funding for the additional support or equipment necessary to include children with additional needs in settings across Wales - some areas will fund equipment/support while others will not."*⁷

While Early Years Wales flagged that families often have to fund the shortfall of funding:

*"If a child needs additional adult support or resources to attend childcare, this can often be limited, for example, if a local authority scheme only offers 5 hours one to one support a week but the child needs to attend for 15 hours to enable the parent to work how is this shortfall managed."*⁸

Oxfam Cymru said that childcare "remains one of the main reasons for women to be economically inactive." They said that 25.5% of economically inactive women are not working because of family and homecare responsibilities.⁹

Accessing inclusive school provision

Even when children reach the age to access statutory school provision, families are finding they have to be available throughout the day, making work often impossible.

One respondent to our consultation described the ongoing struggles they have had in accessing education for their son who has brain damage following a brain tumour.

"He is inprimary has one to one support for 7.5 hours a week!!!! There have been horrendous behavioural issues in school to the point.... stays in school 20-30 mins unsupervised then has to be collected. The only way.... remains in school currently is if myself or my son go in with him, stay with him, supervise him, try to teach him and ultimately take responsibility for him.

*"I was working but had to give up my job as what employer will let you leave after 20 minutes on a repeated basis. Childcare options for children with needs are very limited, I'm a single parent with no local family support and am ex husband who is very intermittent in his commitment to my son."*¹⁰

Another parent told us that their child is often "kicked out of school" because the staff cannot cope, and they are repeatedly contacted to come and pick her up. As a result it's impossible for the parent

⁷ [Written evidence, AEC 30, Royal College of Occupational Therapists](#)

⁸ [Written evidence, AEC 53, Early Years Wales](#)

⁹ [Written evidence, AEC 57, Oxfam Cymru](#)

¹⁰ [Written evidence, AEC 12 Individual](#)

to work, as they don't know when they will be called by the school.¹¹ For another parent the reduced timetable their child follows means:

"I have had to give up work – I'm classed as a carer, if there were options out there for me I would have taken them, I loved to work but the reduced timetable made things very restrictive. Now we have to survive on benefits."

They went on to say that they would be happy for their child to follow a reduced timetable if it was accompanied by "wrap around care" where they are not learning but under the care of the school. This would enable the parent to access work opportunities.¹²

The Third Sector Additional Needs Alliance also highlighted the impact of reduced timetables or exclusions can have on a family's ability to work:

"But we know that where pupils are regularly excluded, actually, parents are far more likely to only be able to work part time because they know that they've got to keep picking them up, and I think SNAP alluded to that—that parents were being disciplined in work. So, an exclusion for a child, apart from them missing out on so much socialisation, let alone education, really has an impact on the whole family and the parents as well."¹³

One of the parents who took part in our family interviews was asked if they are able to work under the child's current school hours, replied saying "no one would want me for like two hours a day, no one."¹⁴

Oxfam Cymru quoted a parent who said:

"If you have a disabled child, it is impossible to work full-time. Childcare for disabled children is next to non-existent. School holidays are impossible. They don't even get the same amount of time in school as non-disabled children. Her school day is 30 minutes shorter every day; she has 2.5 hours less schooling per week than her nondisabled sibling! We have to use hours meant to be for respite to cover the gap between school finishing (early because she doesn't get a full school day - why??) and work finishing. Disability discrimination at its finest."¹⁵

The All Wales Forum also told us about the other care factors that could impact on a parent / carer being able to work:

¹¹ CYPE Citizen Engagement (published note to follow)

¹² CYPE Citizen Engagement (published note to follow)

¹³ [CYPE Committee, 7 June 2023, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 292](#)

¹⁴ CYPE Citizen Engagement (published note to follow)

¹⁵ [Written evidence, AEC 57, Oxfam Cymru](#)

"... That lack of specialised support—and this is extensive, because that specialised support could be tube feeding, it could be toilet changes, it could be sensorial needs, it could be specialised autism support—the lack of that means that the parent is going to have to have an impact on their own life and employment, having to come and pick up the child early, being reprimanded both from the school and their job, but also it's watching your child struggle through years of education and having to make the decision of, 'Am I going to watch my child struggle or am I going to put my well-being in second place, my job, my interests, my life, and stay at home and home school my child?'"¹⁶

We are also hearing examples of families feeling that they have no choice but to homeschool their children:

"I've always had to homeschool my child. The schools around where we live wouldn't take them and the nearest school was so far away logistically it wouldn't make sense, we would have spent all day travelling back and forth and with my child's disabilities, that wouldn't be possible." Ceredigion"¹⁷

Accessing after-school and holiday childcare

There are also significant issues with families being able to secure inclusive after-school and holiday club provision. Parents and carers have described being only able to work in jobs that offer term-time working, or having to stop working altogether. You may wish to be aware of the report by Contact on [holiday club provision for disabled children](#).

Adele Rose-Morgan, who is an inclusive education campaigner gave evidence on behalf of Learning Disability Wales and described trying to access childcare for her son:

"On childcare, we eventually moved him to a unit for deaf children, because we found out late that he was deaf, and there was a breakfast club there. He could only go there with support, and the support came from a fund outside of education. And at one time, the funding criteria changed, and my husband's wage had gone up a little bit, so it was outside the criteria. So, the headmistress called me in and said, 'Look, you're no longer entitled to this but we will pay it'—out of the parental contributions that they used to collect. I just couldn't do that, so I used to just pay for the breakfast club. I used to give £10. It was one day a week, just so he had that social inclusion. I also refused a taxi. I insisted on taking him, and I was able to do it. He was my youngest, and we were able to have a second car, so it worked. He started and finished at different times. That posed a problem because

¹⁶ [CYPE Committee, 7 June 2023, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 296](#)

¹⁷ [Written evidence, AEC 05 Third Sector Additional Needs Alliance](#)

the private childcare within the school didn't start their session until 10 minutes after he'd finished, and they weren't sure, because he would need one to one, whether it would cost a lot more. I applied for a job and I couldn't pursue that because I couldn't work out the childcare around that."¹⁸

A parent who is a member of the Swansea Parent Carer Forum said:

*" My child is now 12. He still needs childcare. At the same age I was able to leave his sister for short periods of time. He cannot access holiday schemes, childminders as he would need 1:1 care and the cost makes this inaccessible and he is too old for private nurseries. Breakfast clubs and after school clubs are not an option because the school cannot afford to cover 1:1 and still run these. I can't work as a result"*¹⁹

Impacts on families

As you can see from the examples above, parents are having to give up jobs / careers in order to look after children. In some cases because of the caring responsibilities across the family, both parents / carers have had to give up work. The strain of coping with these pressures can result in the breakup of families which will have an impact on household income.²⁰ We were told that four out of five marriages with a disabled child fail.²¹ Sparkle said that relationships often break down because parents cannot spend "quality time together or share experiences" because they are often "ships in the night" missing each other because one parent will work when the other is at home, because they cannot work at the same time because of a lack of childcare.²²

One respondent described the particular impact on their family:

*"...Because of his needs I was not able to find any childcare for him at all. This meant his father had to give up work to care for him and this eventually helped contribute to the breakdown of our nuclear family as financial pressures were building. The rate of divorce in families with a child with disabilities is far higher than the average population because of the isolation from society and lack of support that other parents can access."*²³

In the research they have done, Sparkle have highlighted:

"Parents talk of finding jobs that fit around their family commitments, rather than jobs they are qualified for or would enjoy. Many parents work at supermarkets

¹⁸ [CYPE Committee, 7 June 2023, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 122](#)

¹⁹ [Written evidence, AEC 55 Swansea Parent Carer Forum](#)

²⁰ [CYPE Committee, Note from Oak Hill Focus Group, 15 September 2023](#)

²¹ [CYPE Committee, Note from Ysgol Bryn Derw school visit, 29 June 2023](#)

²² [Written evidence, AEC 36, Chair, Sparkle](#)

²³ [Written evidence, AEC 31 Individual](#)

*because they can work around school hours or late in the evenings when another parent is home. These are specific employment restrictions and considerations that families with typically developing children may not face."*²⁴

The challenges of securing employment that fits around caring responsibilities will also be a much longer-term issue for these families:

*"Another parent commented that when someone has a child with a disability their expectations surrounding parenting have to change; most parents expect that when their child is around 12/13 years old, they'll be able to spend an hour home alone after school, meaning the parent can work typical '9-5' hours. However, parents of children with disabilities are not able to do this due to their child's high support needs; they describe their child's lack of cognitive development as essentially meaning they care for a 12/13 year old toddler, and as they have no sense of danger they cannot be left alone for any time. Parents therefore have no choice but to be at home with their child if they cannot source appropriate childcare, limiting their employment options and the number of hours they can work."*²⁵

This will also have an impact on parents / carers ability to work, along with the additional costs that can come from home education.

Longer term impact on household incomes

As well as reducing income in the present these issues result in a long term impact on household income. In particular, in relation to overall household income, pension income or causing restrictions on a family's ability to buy or rent their preferred home in their preferred area. One parent said they hadn't been able to work for 15 years because of a lack of appropriate childcare, and that as a result they have no pension resulting in the need for more state support. They said if they had been able to access childcare, they would have been able to work reducing their reliance on state support and saving the state money.²⁶ We were also told that not being able to work limits future opportunities and that "it changes your future."²⁷

Additional costs faced by families with disabled children

For many families they face additional costs which further reduce household income. Many of these costs are for services or equipment which they feel should not be borne by the individual family.

²⁴ [Written evidence, AEC 36, Chair, Sparkle](#)

²⁵ [Written evidence, AEC 36, Chair, Sparkle](#)

²⁶ [CYPE Committee, Note from Oak Hill Focus Group, 15 September 2023](#)

²⁷ [CYPE Committee, Note from Ysgol Bryn Derw school visit, 29 June 2023](#)

Costs of childcare

This starts early with the costs of childcare. At a focus group, one parent told us that she had to pay for private childcare provision for her disabled child, yet there was funded provision for non-disabled children.²⁸ While the National Autistic Society also raised concerns about the cost of specialist private provision saying:

"Even where specialist private provision exists, the financial cost can be a significant barrier. Families tell us they feel discriminated against in accessing free childcare because mainstream public-run nurseries often do not cater to their child."²⁹

Oxfam Cymru quoted a parent who had children with a range of differing needs that the cost of childcare "has rendered it impossible for me to return to work."³⁰

Mudiad Meithrin quoted a parent who has not been able to access holiday / respite care saying:

"We're not eligible for [respite] either, and we have to pay a family friend to do this for us. The holidays are a nightmare. We need more help and support. It's costing us a lot of money. Our son's costs are so much more expensive than other children so we must continue to work on very little sleep and very little respite in order to fund the extra needs. It's lonely and we're exhausted."³¹

Costs of equipment / transport

Parents we spoke to as part of our citizen engagement raised the additional costs that their families face:

"Anything that's got "special needs" written in the title you can guarantee will cost more than anything else."

While another parent said:

"When you speak to parents of anyone with a disability, in order to achieve the things that you would like your child to have, you normally have to go further afield. And that then becomes expensive."³²

²⁸ [CYPE Committee, Note from Sparkle Focus Group, 15 September 2023.](#)

²⁹ [Written evidence, AEC 05 Third Sector Additional Needs Alliance](#)

³⁰ [Written evidence, AEC 57, Oxfam Cymru](#)

³¹ [Written evidence, AEC 51 Mudiad Meithrin](#)

³² CYPE Citizen Engagement (published note to follow)

We have heard examples of families having to provide specialised equipment to be used in the childcare and nursery settings.³³ This equipment can often be very expensive. The Royal College of Occupational Therapists highlighted that in some areas there are “partnership agreements across health and education” which allows for the purchasing and recycling of such equipment, but that this is not consistent across Wales.³⁴

A parent of a college student told us that they were quoted a weekly charge of £178 for an accessible taxi to take their child to college. Yet if they lived in a neighbouring local authority, this would be fully funded. When they raised this discrepancy in provision, they were told their child should not have been enrolled in the college when they knew they did not have transport. As a result the parent has had to change their working pattern to enable them to take their child into college, with the taxi picking their child up. This is still costing £88 a week. Their child said to us, that non-disabled young people can access subsidies to reduce the cost of transport but this is not available to disabled young people.³⁵

Accessing private support

We heard examples of people either accessing private support, or wishing that they could afford to access private support.

One parent, whose child has suspected autism, said their child has been waiting for assessment since April 2021 (despite requests for assessment starting at an even earlier age.) Their child will not be seen until April 2024, and since their child went on the waiting list, the list has lengthened, and the wait is now approximately 3 years.³⁶ Another family described a wait of 7.5 years in securing a diagnosis, in which time their child’s mental health “has taken an absolute battering and she has tried to take her own life twice.”³⁷ The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, said that the waiting time for an autism /ADHD assessment ranges between 47 and 166 weeks across Wales.³⁸

In this context, it is therefore unsurprising that we have heard of families accessing private diagnosis if they are in a position to do so. Obviously this length of wait is all time that is being lost in ensuring a child gets the right support in place, and is time that cannot be regained either in terms of education outcomes or wider emotional and mental wellbeing. Yet this can come at a huge financial cost, and clearly entrenches further inequality, as not everybody will be able to fund private support. One family described the potential cost of £6,000 for assessment for two children in a single family who needed

³³ [CYPE Committee, Note from Sparkle Focus Group, 15 September 2023.](#)

³⁴ [Written evidence, AEC 30, Royal College of Occupational Therapists](#)

³⁵ [CYPE Committee, Note from Sparkle Focus Group, 15 September 2023.](#)

³⁶ [Written evidence, AEC 10 Individual](#)

³⁷ [Written evidence, AEC 33 Individual](#)

³⁸ [Written evidence, AEC 49, Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health Wales](#)

assessment.³⁹ Another family told us they do not have the “financial means for legal support if needed, and I do not have a home that I can re-mortgage to provide private support for my children.”⁴⁰

The parent who described the breakdown of their relationship as a result of the financial stress placed upon them (see above), also highlighted that they had to take out loans to access private healthcare:

“Indirectly, we have been adversely impacted because of the financial strain of losing one income. This was a factor in causing our family to split and father and I are now divorced. The lack of external help caused us to seek out private speech and language appointments as the wait was nearly 2 years to be seen despite not talking. He also had extreme pain every night due to compacted ears and because of his ALN he would need to be put under a general anaesthetic to have this treated. We ended up taking out loans to pay for this privately to ease his pain. Neurotypical children could have been treated with microsuction while awake. He also had bi lateral grommets inserted as he was found to have glue ear (being non verbal he cannot explain the pain he has) and it was not until 3 years after he started screaming in pain every night that he finally saw an ENT on the NHS. I don't know how we would have survived had we not sought private surgery on his 3rd birthday.”⁴¹

We have also heard about the legal costs of having to go through tribunals to secure appropriate support for their families.

Impact of the cost of living crisis

We have also heard that the cost of living crisis is also preventing families from accessing activities that might benefit their children. The Royal College of Occupational Therapists told us:

“Occupational Therapists report that the cost-of-living crisis is affecting opportunities for children and young people to benefit from extra-curricular activities. 56% of Welsh survey respondents said families were cutting back of activities that would support their child's health, development and wellbeing (such as swimming lessons) due to their cost.”⁴²

Direct payments

³⁹ [CYPE Committee, Note from Sparkle Focus Group, 15 September 2023.](#)

⁴⁰ [Written evidence, AEC 33, Individual](#)

⁴¹ [Written evidence, AEC 31, Individual](#)

⁴² [Written evidence, AEC 30, Royal College of Occupational Therapists](#)

Although outside of the scope of the inquiry, we have also heard significant issues with the direct payments system. In particular the administrative burden and the challenges in securing personal assistants.⁴³ We have heard that the administration is overwhelming. One of the parents said:

"I don't feel the direct payments are empowering or do what they are supposed to do. You don't have the head space to deal with things as they are happening. You are living hand to mouth. You are trying to cope with the daily challenges. Which there are just so many of because I've got one child who wants to go a millions miles an hour, gets really overwhelmed if they get hungry or cold or hot, they cannot wait, they have no patience whatsoever and another child who's mostly limited to a wheelchair, that can't do everything fast, and you have to be patient."⁴⁴

We acknowledge that this is a non-devolved issue, but wanted to highlight it as it should be a tool that helps families access support, but is not working as it should.

The charity, Sparkle shared research they have undertaken, and the issue of direct payments was raised with them:

"The offer of direct payments to cover the cost of childcare or respite is welcomed, however families are still required to source appropriate workers, a task which families find stressful. Further stress is caused once a suitable person is found as the family have to become an 'employer', calculating wages and tax. Families with children with additional needs rarely have the time to learn about the business side and therefore these arrangements often fail."⁴⁵

Entrenchment of disadvantage

We are aware that families with disabled children are more likely to be living below the poverty line, and that this then can create additional barriers to them accessing inclusive services and support that meet the child's and wider family needs, further entrenching disadvantage longer term.

Organisations such as Disability Wales raised concerns about the impact faced by disabled children who have to live both with the impact of their disability and their poverty, and what this can mean for children's educational outcomes. They cited differences between the number of disabled people leaving education without qualifications and those who are not disabled.⁴⁶

"It is well established that educational outcomes for disabled people differs to non-disabled people. In Wales, from June 2020-2021, 37.9% of nondisabled people's

⁴³ [Written evidence, AEC 19 Individual](#)

⁴⁴ CYPE Citizen Engagement (published note to follow)

⁴⁵ [Written evidence, AEC 36, Chair, Sparkle](#)

⁴⁶ [CYPE Committee, 7 June 2023, Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 64- 65](#)

*highest qualification was a degree or equivalent, compared to 21.5% of disabled people. In the most even statistics, 21.6% of non-disabled people's highest qualification was a A-level or equivalent, compared to 20.7% of disabled people. 18.8% of non-disabled people's highest qualification was GCSE grade C or above or equivalent, compared to 24% of disabled people. 9.4% of non-disabled people's highest qualification was another form of higher education, compared to 7.3% of disabled people. 5.9% of non-disabled people had no qualifications, compared to the significantly higher 16.4% of disabled people."*⁴⁷

Clearly educational outcomes can have a life-long impact on a person's opportunities to earn money, so that this is another angle that needs consideration within the Child Poverty Strategy. The intersectionality of these issues also needs careful thought and should be addressed within any strategy seeking to reduce child poverty.

In relation to provision for childcare, Oxfam Cymru called for this, particularly for the provision of childcare and early education access for "children from different ethnic backgrounds and disabled children." They said that only by "recognising and addressing" these children's "unique needs and challenges" can we ensure that childcare and early education is "truly inclusive and equitable."⁴⁸

We are concerned that for many of the families we have spoken to they will face a combination of all of these issues. We are also acutely aware that our evidence gathering has only allowed us to take a "snapshot" of evidence, and that there will be families who may be experiencing other issues which we are not aware of.

We will continue to pursue these issues through our current inquiry, but we wanted to ensure that this was brought to your attention and could help inform your current work. We will keep you updated with any relevant information or developments in this area of work.

I hope this evidence is useful to your Committee.

Yours sincerely,



Jayne Bryant MS
Chair

⁴⁷ [Written evidence, AEC 09 Disability Wales](#)

⁴⁸ [Written evidence, AEC 57, Oxfam Cymru](#)

Croesewir gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg neu Saesneg.

We welcome correspondence in Welsh or English.