

MINUTES of
Cross Party Group for Children & Families
9 November 2022, 11am to 12pm

1. Welcome/Introductions

Jane Dodds MS welcomed everyone to the meeting and thanked them for their interest in attending this group. She confirmed that the workplan for the next couple of years has recently been amended and that a copy would be forwarded with the minutes of this meeting.

2. Apologies

Peredur Owen Griffiths MS
Llyr Gruffydd MS
Delyth Jewell MS
Sarah Murphy MS
Sharon Lovell, NYAS
Gethin Matthews-Jones, RCPCH
Andrea Gordon, Guide Dogs Cymru
Cecile Gwilym, NSPCC Cymru
Patrick Thomas, Trustee, Children in Wales

3. Children's Commissioner for Wales – priorities for the next term and Q&A

Jane Dodds welcomed Rocio Cifuentes to the meeting and thanked her for her time.

Rocio began by giving a brief background to her previous roles where she had been a teacher, had and worked with children and young people with disabilities and those from minority ethnic groups. She followed-on with an update on what she had been concentrating on during her first six months as Commissioner, including:

- Getting to grips with all the different issues that affect children and young people in Wales at present
- Learning about all the organisations that exist to support them and the pressures they face
- Travelling widely across Wales to visit local authorities, schools, youth groups, hospices, mental health hospital, a secure unit and the Urdd Festival
- Appreciating the pressures on the workforce and how recruitment and retention of staff is a huge issue in Wales, amongst teacher, mental health practitioners, social care workers and others

- Understanding the true extent of the pandemic, child poverty and the cost of living crisis

Rocio confirmed that the final two bullet points above would be her main priority areas and will work with the Welsh Government to make a change.

Promoting and raising the profile of her and her team's roles, with stakeholders and children and young people themselves, will be another area of focus. At present they are a team of 23, whose responsibilities include:

- Protecting and promoting children's rights and enforcing the UNCRC
- Supporting and advising children and young people with their issues
- Influencing decision makers
- Speaking-up on behalf of the children and young people of Wales

Three teams currently exist:

Participation Team

Predominantly made up of youth workers who undertake direct engagement activities with children and young people

Investigation & Advice Team

Providing a helpline and information service to support children who may not be accessing their rights. They also review the functions of government

Policy Team

Scrutinising government policy and offering support in how it can be improved

Rocio will be looking to work on the diversity of stakeholders that are currently involved with her office and make stronger connections and build new links. She also confirmed her wishes to work more closely with this Cross Party Group to make the voice of the child stronger.

At this point Jane Dodds mentioned the other Cross Party Group for Children in Care, supported by Voices from Care Cymru, and agreed to provide Rocio with the workplan for that group too.

Jane Dodds thanked Rocio for her presentation and opened the floor to questions.

Question –

Jane Dodds: what will you, in conjunction with the Welsh Government, be doing to help children and young people in poverty?

Rocio mentioned that she, and her counterparts in other UK countries, have issued joint statements around child poverty and she will expect the Welsh Government to do much more to help alleviate the issues. She has formally called for a new Child Poverty Action Plan to be formulated, which will be easy to understand and measure. Audit Wales has also asked Welsh Government for information on what the funding is being spent on. Rocio mentioned that she's supportive of the emergency measures being put in place, but there needs to be a clear plan of action.

Question –

Mark Carter, Barnardo's Cymru: our significant concern is the impact of austerity on vital services. How can we work collectively and ensure that children are protected?

Rocio agreed that children do need more protection and that the role the voluntary sector in Wales plays needs to be recognised and valued more.

Viv Laing, NSPCC Cymru: with the tragic murder of Logan Mwangi in Bridgend back in April, there needs to be a radical transformation of children's social services. What will you be asking Welsh Government to do about this?

Rocio confirmed that there is the possibility of a Review of Social Care in Wales taking place and that a workplan from the Welsh Government, on how they intend to transform children's social services, will be requested. She confirmed that we owe the public this and that she will be looking for more details on timescales and a roadmap. She is having regular meetings with the Chief Social Services Director at present.

At this point, Jane Dodds confirmed that she too is asking for a full review of Children's Services and child protection across Wales. There is not current evidence available of any good practice and this needs addressing.

Question –

Sarah Thomas, Fostering Network Wales: the pressure on our social care workforce has now peaked. Different local authorities in Wales are offering different salaries and terms and conditions, and job satisfaction is at an all-time low. Social workers are leaving their roles and agency staff, who are commanding much higher wages, are being used. The impact of this on fostering services is huge.

Rocio confirmed that local authorities seem to be very defensive regarding this, and that no-one is directing or managing their outputs. This then leaves outside agencies to capitalise on the inefficiencies. There is a lack of direction here.

Jane Dodds asked Sarah whether she would be willing to make a note of the issues her sector is facing and they could be circulated to this group.

Question –

Bethan Webber, Home Start Cymru: as other colleagues before her, Bethan mentioned the issues happening within early intervention services and the workforce. The parenting and volunteering workforce need to be considered too. Also, the issue of private sector organisations profiting from providing care facilities needs to be removed. What will you be doing to address this?

Rocio confirmed that these two areas need to be on everyone's radar and fears that things are not widely understood at present. The voluntary sector needs to be more involved.

At this point, Jane Dodds confirmed that the Labour government is doing a great deal of work in this area. The Deputy Minister for Social Services, Julie Morgan, will be attending the next meeting in January, so she encouraged group members to think of questions in readiness and that the meeting should be recorded.

Question –

Jane Dodds: what is your vision about working more closely with this CPG and the voluntary sector members within it?

Rocio confirmed that she'd be very keen to work more closely with the group, especially on her main priority area of child poverty. She agreed to speak to her Policy Team to consider this further.

She also believes that the voluntary sector is a huge resource that needs to be considered more widely, and that better lines of communication will be opened in the future. This is something that she and her teams will consider.

Jane Dodds thanked Rocio for attending and taking the time to answer questions, and that she's welcome to attend future meetings of the CPG.

4. AOB

None.

5. Date of next meetings

17 January 2023 from 10.30am to 11.30am – hybrid meeting – room at Ty Hywel and online. Deputy Minister for Social Services to present around Edge of Care Services

7 June 2023, 10.30am to 11.30am

27 September 2023, 10.30am to 11.30am

29 November 2023, 10.30am to 11.30am

Jane Dodds thanked everyone for taking the time to attend and wished group members a Happy Christmas!