

Cross Party Group on poverty – Meeting Note - 2 March 2023

Attendees:

John Griffiths MS – Chair
Steffan Evans – Bevan Foundation (Secretariat)
Jane Hutt MS – Minister for Social Justice
Jane Dodds MS
Amy Bainton – Barnados
Viki Baltzars – Trivallis
Andrew Bettridge – Office of John Griffiths MS
Cherrie Bija – Faith in Families
Zoe Charlsworth – Policy in Practice
Alex Clegg – Policy in Practice
Karen Davies – Purple Shoots
Amy Dutton – Citizens Advice Cymru
Emma Denholm-Hall – Office of the Future Generations Commissioner
Danny Graham – Heledd Fychan
Sarah Germain – Fare Share
Sally Hunt – Welsh Government
Kelly Huxley-Roberts
Jamie Insole – University and College Union
Lindsey Kearton – Citizens Advice
Susan Lloyd-Selby – Trussell Trust
Maria Marshall – Food Aid Network
Gareth Morgan – Ferret Information Systems
Katie Palmer – Food Sense Wales
Jack Rowlands - Policy in Practice
George Watkins - Mind
Bethan Webber – Home Start Cymru
Liz Williams – RNIB

Meeting note

1. The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.
2. Before introducing the first speaker the Chair informed members that there had been a change to the agenda. The Minister for Social Justice, Jane Hutt MS would now speak first, with Policy in Practice going second.
3. The Chair invited the Minister for Social Justice to start the first session, where she provided an update on the work of the Welsh Government in addressing the cost of living crisis.
4. The Minister provided an update on the progress made by the Welsh Government across a number of different programmes and policies. Among the key points made by the Minister were:
 - a. The Minister noted the Welsh Government’s interest in the work that has been undertaken on the Welsh Benefits System, and she was eager to hear more about the work undertaken by Policy in Practice as set out in the second agenda item.

- b. The Minister emphasised the importance of the Council Tax Reduction Scheme to the Welsh Government and reminded participants that the Welsh Government spent £244m on the scheme annually assisting 270,000 households.
 - c. Funding for the Welsh Government's Childcare offer is set to increase over the next two budgets, rising to £86.5m in the 2024/25 financial year.
 - d. The roll out of universal free school meals is progressing well with an additional 45,000 reception class pupils now receiving free school meals.
 - e. The Schools Essentials Grant has replaced the Pupil Development Grant (Access). In the next school year children in all year groups up to year 11 will be entitled to £125 with £200 being made available to children in year 7.
 - f. £25m of discretionary funding has been provided to local authorities in the current financial year to support families. The Minister is eager to explore how that funding was used to see what lessons can be learned about supporting people.
 - g. As of February 17, 323,251 payments had been made through the Welsh Government's Fuel Support Scheme. This is double the number of households that benefitted from the scheme the previous winter. The scheme will not be re-run due to a lack of funding from the UK Government.
 - h. The Welsh Government are working in partnership with the Fuel Bank Foundation to expand their fuel voucher scheme into Wales with the Welsh Government investing £4m.
 - i. The Welsh Government have invested £10m to prevent homelessness and to maintain the nobody out policy.
 - j. The Minister drew members' attention to a written statement she had published on the Discretionary Assistance Fund. The statement confirmed that the budget for DAF would stand at £38.5m in the next financial year and her statement contained more information as to how the scheme would operate.
 - k. The Welsh Government has invested £4.9m in tackling food poverty this financial year and is eager to support greater resilience within the sector by supporting community food organisations.
 - l. The Minister called on members to support the Welsh Government's "claim what's yours campaign" its work in updating its child poverty strategy, which will open for consultation over the coming months
 - m. The Minister noted that an update on the progress of the care leavers basic income trial would be published soon.
5. The Chair thanked the Minister for her contribution and opened the discussion to questions from the floor. There was a wide range of questions raised and points made. Among the issues covered were:
- a. The importance of the crisis fund for women affected by domestic abuse with no recourse to public funds.

- b. What lessons can be drawn from the higher take up of the Welsh Government Fuel Support Scheme in its latest iteration that could be applied elsewhere.
 - c. Are there opportunities to fully devolve the Healthy Start Scheme given that it is currently linked to the English scheme?
 - d. How can we better stimulate local supply chains to benefit local economies and provide food and energy security?
 - e. How much of the additional £4m to solve food poverty will be spent on food aid and how much will be spent on preventing need?
 - f. How much is work on poverty feeding into the Welsh Government's updated mental health strategy?
6. In response to the questions the Minister:
- a. Acknowledged the importance of providing support to women affected by domestic abuse with no recourse to public funds.
 - b. Stated that she believed that there were lessons to be drawn from the higher take up of the Fuel Support Schemes, in particular around the administration of benefits. Some local authorities have had much higher take up than others and the Minister believes that the greater use of automation has played a crucial role in assisting the local authorities that have performed better to get money out. In total 11 out of 22 local authorities used an automated system.
 - c. Noted that she is working closely with Lynn Neagle MS who is responsible for the Healthy Start Scheme. The Welsh Government are actively looking at what can be done to improve take up of the scheme and the Minister will feedback the CPG's comments to the team working on this.
 - d. Revealed that she is meeting with Lesley Griffiths MS to discuss issues around procurement and food security and believes that she views this as a cross-government issue.
 - e. Stated that she is eager to work with the sector to explore the best approach to take to address food poverty and would welcome engagement with interested parties.
 - f. Expressed her belief that the question on poverty and mental health emphasized how poverty was a cross cutting issue and she noted she would go and share the group's views with Lynn Neagle MS who was directly responsible for this policy area.
7. The Chair thanked the Minister for her time and moved on to the second agenda item, a presentation by Policy in Practice on their work on the Welsh Benefits System.
8. First to speak on behalf of Policy in Practice was Zoe Charlsworth. Having provided initial background information about the work undertaken by Policy in Practice, Zoe proceeded to share the findings of their work. Among the headline findings were:
- a. All Welsh Benefits combined are worth £5,400 per year for a household.

- b. Having a common approach to Welsh Benefits could increase take up and allow them to have a distinct identity from those emanating from Westminster.
 - c. At present no such common approach exists. There is a lack of cohesion Welsh Benefits and they don't present as part of a Wales wide benefits system.
 - d. The different data requirements for each scheme means that there is not a common match in terms of data across any Welsh benefits, but there is an opportunity to make more of the data that exists. This includes making better use of the data to identify eligibility, using Universal Credit information to partially automate the application process and awards for the majority of applicants for free school meals and Council tax reduction, and making better use of verification data to reduce the need for applicants to share information.
 - e. There are barriers to establishing a cohesive Welsh Benefits System. These include risks from increased reliance on external data (e.g. UC), data sharing protocols, cost of increased take up, adherence to historic ways of working and technological barriers including long term contractual arrangements with current IT providers.
 - f. To overcome these barriers a phased approach to implementing a Welsh Benefits System is recommended. To start implementation the Welsh Government should look at low hanging fruit including ensuring that all Welsh benefits have a cohesive design, review data capture requirements and agree a common approach to using Universal Credit data in Universal Credit applications. In the longer term the Welsh Government should aim to establish a common digital application portal to establish a partially automated single digital application form. Other longer term measures include reaching data sharing agreements with DWP.
9. Following Zoe's presentation Alex Clegg from Policy in Practice gave a short overview on what they estimated some of the financial implications of greater take up of benefits could be:
- a. In total they estimate that the increased take up that would follow the creation of a Welsh Benefits System would cost approximately £75m with the vast majority of this (£68m) being attributable to increased take up of the Council Tax Reduction Scheme.
 - b. Whilst the increase take up of Welsh Benefits would have cost implications, there could be financial benefits as well, both to local economies as people spend the extra benefits they receive and to public services if there is reduced demand or health or homelessness services for example.
10. The Chair thanked both Zoe and Alex for their presentations and asked those present to send any questions that they may have to Steffan Evans, the secretariat for the group.
11. The Chair handed over to Jane Dodds MS for the final agenda item. Jane Dodds MS is the Chair of the CPG for children and families and is eager to explore possibilities for collaborating with the CPG on poverty.
12. Jane Dodds MS set out that the CPG for children and families have four themes for the year one of which is poverty. She proposed that the CPGs could host a joint meeting in the

autumn where we work together to explore the issues and invite the relevant Ministers and First Minister along to the session.

13. The Chair stated that he believed that this was something he was eager to pursue and hoped that the secretariats for both groups could take the idea forward in the first instance.
14. To close her session, Jane Dodds MS issued an invitation to all members of the CPG on poverty to join meetings of the CPG on children and families if they were interested in their work.
15. The Chair thanked everyone for their contributions and their attendance at the meeting.