

Cross Party Group on poverty – Meeting Note – 13 October 2022

Attendees:

John Griffiths MS (Chair)
Steffan Evans – Bevan Foundation (Secretariat)
Altaf Hussain - MS
Huw-Irranca Davies – MS
Peredur Owen Griffiths – MS
Carolyn Thomas – MS
Bethan Webber – Home Start Cymru
Izzabella James – Home Start Cymru
Abigail Rees – Cymorth Cymru
Ben Saltmarsh – National Energy Action
Andrew Betteridge – Office of John Griffiths
Cath Lewis – Carers Wales
Catherine Rees – Save the Children
Ryland Doyle – Office of Mike Hedges
Duncan Holtham – People and Work
Elinor Matthey – Bevan Foundation
Fadhilah Gubari – Oxfam Cymru
Eleri Griffiths – Office of Heledd Fychan MS
Jessica Blair – Electoral Reform Society Cymru
Billy Jones -
Karen Davies – Purple Shoots
Karen McFarlane – Children in Wales
Kathryn Newman – Child Poverty Action Group
Tom Livesey - Group Researcher for Welsh Conservatives
Gareth Llewellyn – Plaid Cymru
Mandy Powell – Cymorth Cymru
Kiera Marshall – Plaid Cymru Group
Dan Rose –
Sharon Atkins – Faith in Families Wales
Shah Alom Shumon – Office of John Griffiths MS
Susan Lloyd Selby – Trussell Trust
Akbar Twahida - Ethnic Minorities & Youth Support Team

Meeting note

1. The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting of the Cross Party Group, setting out why he thought the topic under discussion was particularly timely. In his introductory remarks the Chair:
 - a. Set out his belief that designing a social security system operates well has never been more important.
 - b. Noted that it is a source of frustration for him that many of the levers that are available to deal with poverty are with the UK government and that these are not being used effectively.

- c. Argued that more might be done to solve poverty if the Welsh Government had more of a say as to how the social security system operates in Wales.
 - d. Provided members with a recap of work that he did as Chair of the Equality and Local Government Committee in fifth Senedd on these issues. The committee concluded that it would be better if powers over the administration of benefits were devolved to Wales.
 - e. He noted that the Committee's recommendations had been adopted by the Welsh Government's and the need undertake work to lay the groundwork for any changes that could be on the horizon in future had never been more important.
 2. Having concluded his introductory remarks the Chair introduced Dr Steffan Evans, Head of Policy (Poverty) at the Bevan Foundation, first speaker at the session.
 3. Steffan gave a short presentation to members outlining what the Bevan Foundation meant by the term "Welsh Benefits" and why they felt it was crucial that a Welsh Benefits System be established. Among the points that he made were:
 - a. That whilst the bulk of the social security system has not been devolved to Wales the Welsh Government does have responsibility over a host of means tested grants and allowances that are benefits in all but name. These grants and allowances provide people with cash, or in-kind support, with eligibility criteria in place to restrict who can receive support. Examples of such schemes include Free School Meals, the Council Tax Reduction Scheme and the Education Maintenance Allowance.
 - b. These various benefits provide Welsh families with significant support. In 2019/20 the Welsh Government was spending £400m a year on these Welsh benefits. More than was being spent on Job Seekers Allowance and the work element of Universal Credit combined.
 - c. There is significant scope to improve this system. He outlined that there are four key issues with the current system.
 - i. Each scheme has different eligibility criteria.
 - ii. Many of the schemes have to be applied for separately making accessing them difficult.
 - iii. The value of the support on offer is not always enough.
 - iv. There are some gaps in the availability of support.
 - d. These various grants and allowances should be pulled together to form a coherent Welsh Benefits System.
 4. John Griffiths thanked Steffan for his presentation and moved on to the second item on the agenda by inviting the Bethan Webber and Izzabella James of Home Start Cymru to share their insights as to share their presentation.
 5. Bethan Webber was the first to speak on behalf of Home Start Cymru.

6. Bethan started her presentation by providing an overview as to the work of Home Start Cymru, a family support charity working across 18 local authorities in Wales. Home Start are a federated network and have five sister Home Start working across Wales. Home Start has a well-trained network of volunteers who support families in their homes on a one-to-one basis, where they offer a range of targeted support. One area where Home Start offers support is around household and personal finances. Their staff and volunteers are finding this work more and more challenging and it's taking up an increasing amount of staff time. This is why Home Start are interested in the concept of a Welsh Benefits System.
7. Bethan handed over to Izzabella to talk about the issues unearthed by Home Start volunteers in greater detail.
8. Izzabella thanked Bethan and noted that her intention was to focus on why Home Start felt that designing a Welsh Benefits System was so important. Izzabella argued that individuals are currently navigating a complex system which is leading to people missing out on support. She provided a number of examples of families, supported by Home Start, that are facing challenges as a result:
 - a. Allison, a mother of three recently received a £326 payment but she wasn't sure what for. She was also unaware that unless you paid your Council Tax by direct debt you had to register to receive the Welsh Government's Cost of Living Payment. She would therefore have missed out various forms of support were it not for the help of Home Start.
 - b. A father supported by Home Start had recently moved on to Universal Credit due to having to take a break from work. He was finding it difficult to balance the household finances and was having to use foodbanks for support. Home Start Cymru uncovered that he had been paying the full amount of council tax for 14 months despite being eligible to have it covered in full by the Council Tax Reduction Scheme. Through Home Start's support he was able to reclaim £1,300.
 - c. Asylum seekers and refugees face significant challenges accessing support, especially families that are not able to communicate confidently in English or Welsh. These challenges are particularly pronounced for asylum seekers given the limited range of support that they are able to access.
9. Izzabella concluded her presentation by outlining how a developing a co-ordinated Welsh Benefits System with a single access point could address a number of these challenges and make a real difference to Welsh families. She handed back to Steffan for the final presentation.
10. Steffan thanked Bethan and Izzabella. His final presentation outlined what a Welsh Benefits System could look like. Among its key features he argued that a Welsh Benefits System should:
 - a. Focus on households on low incomes defined as being eligible for Universal Credit.
 - b. Provide cash or in-kind help that is sufficient to make a real difference to households' incomes or costs.
 - c. Have a single point of access for several benefits, using online, phone or postal methods.

- d. Where possible based on eligibility for and an entitlement to assistance, not discretion.
 - e. That all applicants are treated with dignity and respect.
11. Steffan argued that this is an idea whose time has come and that there is significant political support for it. He noted that there is some work ongoing within the Welsh Government on the idea, in particular the work on establishing a Welsh Benefits Charter but raised concerns that this would likely on take the shape of guidance. He argued that any system should be put on a more robust footing.
12. To conclude Steffan revealed that the Bevan Foundation and a number of partners have recently commissioned external experts, Policy in Practice to undertake work to explore barriers to implementation so that solutions can be developed and a more cohesive system designed.
13. The chair thanks Steffan, Bethan and Izzabella for their presentations and opened up the conversation to the floor. There was a wide range of questions raised and points made. Among the issues covered were:
- a. That the complicated nature of the current system is something that is a source of frustration for a range of organisations and families across Wales and that it is leading to people to miss out on support that they are entitled to.
 - b. Whether complexity is an inherent part of any social security system and something that couldn't be resolved even with the creation of a Welsh Benefits System.
 - c. Whether the idea of creating a Welsh Benefits System involved devolving further powers over the social security system to Wales.
 - d. How would the creation of a Welsh Benefits System address the weaknesses of the current approach with regards to the gaps in the support available?
 - e. At present some families don't come forward for support because they are afraid of the consequences of doing so for debt etc. Would creating one, unified system increase the risk of people not applying for support because they'd fear data being shared across departments?
14. In response to the questions Steffan noted:
- a. Complexity is inherent in any system that retains a degree of discretion. There are likely to be reasons why you might want to retain some discretionary schemes in any social security system so that complexity can't be eradicated in its entirety. He argued that this doesn't mean to say that you can't reduce the complexity within the current system, however, in particular with regards to rights-based benefits, significantly reducing the number of application forms families would need to complete.
 - b. From the Bevan Foundation's perspective the primary focus of its work on a Welsh Benefits System was to make the powers that have currently been devolved to Wales work better. He noted that whilst a more informed discussion on whether further powers over social security should be devolved to Wales could be a useful

by-product of establishing a Welsh Benefits System this was not the primary objective of the Foundation's work.

- c. That creating a single Welsh Benefits System would provide an opportunity to better identify what are the gaps in support available through "Welsh Benefits". At the moment this is difficult to do as the schemes are so disparate but pulling them together into one system would provide an opportunity to identify gaps and to consider whether the solution to this would be to create a new scheme or to put more money into a scheme that already existed.
 - d. Many of the problems in terms of people not coming forward for the support they are entitled to already exist. Creating a unified Welsh Benefits System gives an opportunity to remove some of these and to address issues, such as the one identified by Izzabella of people being in arrears on their Council Tax despite being eligible for the Council Tax Reduction Scheme.
15. In response to the discussion Bethan Webber also noted that a particular feature of the current cost of living crisis is that there are groups of people falling into poverty or falling into a situation where they maybe are seeking entitlement for the first time.
16. The Chair thanked everyone for their contribution and shared some closing remarks. In doing so the Chair, in consultation with members identified three actions for the group to follow up:
- a. Steffan will keep the group updates on the progress of the work undertaken by Policy in Practice.
 - b. The Chair will write to the Welsh Government to ask for more details on the work that they are doing on Welsh Benefits.
 - c. The Chair will write to the Minister for Social Justice asking for an update as to what progress is being made against the recommendations made by his committee in the previous Senedd.
17. Meeting closed.