

Cross Party Group on poverty – Meeting Note – 3 February 2022

Attendees:

John Griffiths MS (Chair)
Steffan Evans – Bevan Foundation (Secretariat)
Jane Hutt MS – Minister for Social Justice
Mike Hedges MS
Sioned Williams MS
Andrew Bettridge – Office of John Griffiths MS
Cherrie Bija – Faith in Families
Katie Palmer – Food Sense Wales
Alex Sims – Office of Jenny Rathbone - MS
Sarah Germain – FareShare Cymru
Karen McFarlane – Children in Wales
Heather Pells – People and Work
Amy Dutton – Citizens Advice
Ellie Harwood – Child Poverty Action Group
Ben Saltmarsh – National Energy Action
Henry Davies – Office of Huw Irranca Davies MS
David Rowlands- Tai Pawb
Amy Bainton - Barnados
Beth Rhodes – Young Food Ambassador, Children’s Right 2 Food Campaign
Fayeth Jones – Young Food Ambassador, Children’s Right 2 Food Campaign
Karen Davies – Purple Shoots
Emma Gooding – Samaritans
Georgia Marks – Red Cross
Robin Lewis – Office of Vikki Howells MS
Zoe McIntyre – Food Foundation
Sarah Rees – Oxfam Cymru
Sian-Elin Davies – Food Sense Wales
Sabine Goodwin – Independent Food Aid Network
Ross Thomas – Tai Pawb
Mary van den Heuvel – National Education Union
Glenn Page - Mind
Denise Barry – TGP Cymru
Ryland Doyle – Office of Mike Hedges
Eleri Griffiths – Office of Heledd Fych MS
Leanne Morgan – Travelling Ahead
Maureen Howell – Welsh Government
Peter Kellem – Welsh Government

Meeting note

1. The Chair welcomed everyone to the second meeting of the Cross Party Group since the election.
2. The Chair introduced Katie Palmer of Food Sense Wales to start the first session on Free School Meals and beyond.
3. Katie opened the session by providing an overview of the causes of food insecurity and possible solutions. During her introduction Katie emphasized the importance of investing in long term solutions to food insecurity rather than in sticking plaster solutions. Among the long-term solutions, she identified that were within the Welsh Government's gift were the community food strategy and promoting take up of Health Start Vouchers.
4. Following the overview Katie introduced Young Food Ambassadors Beth Rhodes and Fayeth Jones from the Right2Food Campaign. The Children's Right2Food Campaign is a UK wide initiative supported by the Food Foundation, with support provided in Wales by Food Sense Wales. The aim of the campaign is to ensure every child in the UK can access and afford good food. The work of the Campaign is led by Young Food Ambassadors which include Beth and Fayeth in Wales. Both have been campaigning on the issue for two years and are particularly passionate about school meals. Among the points made by Beth and Fayeth were:
 - a. That they welcomed the Welsh Government's decisions to expand free school meals to all primary school pupils. They felt that universal provision is key to reducing stigma and improving nutrition.
 - b. Concerns that current plans are limited to primary schools. The transition between primary and secondary schools may present a challenge to families, whilst many older children will be missing out on school meals even as they face vital exams.
 - c. An interim option to deal with this challenge may be to increase eligibility for Free School Meals for secondary school pupils so that the families that are worse hit are provided with support, moving to introduce universal provision when roll out in primary schools is completed.
 - d. Concerns that rising living costs will have an impact on access to food. Given that universal primary school meals won't be in place for two years, calls were made for the Welsh Government to increase the eligibility criteria in the interim so that children from low-income families can get support through the current crisis.
 - e. Other measures can be taken to support children on issues relating to food beyond expanding eligibility. For example, many children don't take up their free school meal entitlement due to concerns about the quality of the food provided or due to a lack of information about allergens, nutritional information.
 - f. Given that children are the customers of school caterers, it is important that children were listened to when developing approaches to food in school.
 - g. More children could be encouraged to join the debate on food in schools by providing them with an opportunity to input into what appears on school menus, hosting focus groups and undertaking surveys. Success can also encourage more people to get involved so it is vital that if children engage with schools, local authorities or Welsh Government that they are shown that they are being listened to.

5. The Chair thanked Beth and Fayeth for their contributions. Before opening to questions from the floor the Chair noted that the CPG have written to Marcus Rashford to highlight the work ongoing to Wales to solve poverty and to invite him to attend a meeting of the group.
6. The Chair opened the discussion to the floor. There was a wide range of questions and points raised. Among the issues covered were:
 - a. The support that the policy sector can offer to the Ambassadors to take their work forward.
 - b. Support for the calls to provide additional support to children in secondary schools.
 - c. Actions that could be taken to address stigma beyond expanding eligibility criteria. Among the actions proposed was changing the name of Free School Meals and ensuring that children in receipt of Free School Meals had the same flexibility in choosing their meal as children who are not in receipt of Free School Meals.
7. To close the session Katie Palmer encouraged any organisations that had contact with young people who might have an interest in becoming Young Food Ambassadors to get in touch. Beth and Fayeth also recommended further resources that members of the CPG may be interested in. These included:
 - a. The Children's Right2Food Charter - <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/publication/childrens-right2food-charter>
 - b. A podcast presented by the Right2Food Ambassadors - <https://shows.acast.com/right2food>
8. The chair thanked, Katie, Beth and Fayeth and moved on to the next item on the agenda, a discussion session with Jane Hutt MS, Minister for Social Justice. The Minister was initially invited to set out the work that is currently on the Welsh Government's agenda, in particular in relation to the cost of living crisis. Among the points made by the Minister were:
 - a. The cost of living crisis is her priority as Minister for Social Justice.
 - b. The Welsh Government have already taken steps to support families affected by the cost of living crisis, including doubling the value of payments made under the Winter Fuel Support Scheme from £100 to £200. The Minister also thanked local authorities for their work in administering payments.
 - c. The Minister asked members of the CPG to share their views on the provision of cash to low-income families. The Minister was especially interested in members' thoughts about the strengths and weaknesses of providing cash as opposed to vouchers.
 - d. A further take-up campaign is now underway with increasing take-up viewed as a priority.
 - e. The Minister set out the calls that she has made to the UK Government including uprating benefits by 6%, reversing the £20 cut made to Universal Credit and providing support to people with their energy bills.
 - f. The Minister announced that she would be visiting a range of projects to get more insights as to the pressures that were being felt on the front line. She called on members of the CPG to share any insights with her and her team to enable them to improve the support that is on offer to people hit by the cost of living crisis.

- g. To conclude the Minister apologised for missing the prior session and extended an invitation to the Right2Food Ambassadors to meet with her and the Education Secretary.
9. 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. There was agreement from members of CPG that providing cash to low-income families is better than providing vouchers. Doing so reduces stigma and provides families with flexibility. There was recognition that there are some challenges to a cash first approach e.g. for people who are overdrawn or don't have a bank account, but it was argued that alternative arrangements can be put in place for people facing such challenges.
 - b. The role of the Discretionary Assistance Fund (DAF). There was concern that whilst record number of people were receiving payments through DAF, thousands of people were seeing their applications rejected. It was argued that it would be incredibly helpful to third sector organisations to have access to more information about who is applying for DAF, why people are making applications, and why people are seeing their applications rejected. This could allow local services to be tailored to meet people's needs.
 - c. Concerns about take up, in particular around the Winter Fuel Scheme. The Minister was asked what plans the Welsh Government have to work with local authorities to boost take up now and to evaluate the scheme to improve the way support is provided in future.
10. In response to the initial questions and comments the Minister thanked members for their contributions. Responding to specific queries the Minister committed to:
 - a. Go back to local authorities to ensure that the Winter Fuel Scheme is being administered as effectively as possible and asked members of the group to share any concerns with her and her team so that the Welsh Government can address any problems.
 - b. Share data on DAF with the CPG. The Minister was aware that data is collected on DAF award by whether the applicant had any protected characteristics and by the local authority where the application was made.
 - c. To engage more with partners, in particular partner organisations that work on delivering DAF.
11. The Chair thanked the Minister for her responses and apologised for having to leave the meeting due to a prior engagement. Steffan Evans of the Bevan Foundation assumed Charing duties. Among further issues explored by members were:
 - a. Concerns that many gypsies, travellers and members of the Roma community may not be able to access the support provided by the Welsh Government.
 - b. Calls to make DAF payments for people who are off gas available all year round, and to clarify the language used in the eligibility criteria for the Winter Fuel Support Scheme for people who are off gas.
 - c. The need for the Welsh Government to review the accuracy of the data it holds on the number of people eligible for support through schemes such as the Winter Fuel

Support Scheme. It was argued that this was crucial to ensure that any future iterations of the scheme or other support programmes were strengthened.

12. Responding the Minister committed:

- a. To take back the concerns raised about the position of gypsies, travellers and members of the Roma community to Welsh Government colleagues and to share the insights with local authorities.
- b. To ask her officials to pick up the issues raised regarding the position of households who are off mains gas.
- c. Raised the importance of working with local authorities in getting support to people and committed to feed back information to the sector when more data became available.

13. The Minister and Steffan thanked members for their attendance and brought the meeting to a close.