

## **Evidence paper for the Equality and Social Justice Committee scrutiny session of the Cabinet Secretary for Culture and Social Justice**

In advance of my attendance at ESJ Committee on 17 June, please find below information in line with the areas of interest highlighted by the Committee.

### **Coordination of cross-cutting issues within the portfolio**

1. Culture, heritage, sport, and social justice are interconnected pillars, and when leveraged effectively can help build a more inclusive, equitable and vibrant society. I want to harness the collective impact of these elements to address systemic inequalities and strengthen community cohesion.
2. Our Child Poverty Strategy, for example, includes objectives to ensure effective cross-government working at the national level and enables strong collaboration at the regional and local level. The strategy sets out our commitment to establish and support a Communities of Practice approach, providing a forum where colleagues from across public services and the third sector across Wales can compare learning and share good practice.
3. All of the equality plans reflect cross-government commitments. The Anti-racist Action Plan, for example, has goals and actions across Ministerial portfolios. Using cross-government levers is pivotal to tackling both inequality and poverty, and the intersectionality between them. This includes delivering on key actions within employment, skills, education, housing, health, etc.
4. The list of ministerial responsibilities reflects all of my areas of responsibility including for equality and human rights. I am pleased therefore to have lead ministerial responsibility for delivering and implementing both the Anti Racist Wales Action Plan (ArWAP) and the LGBTQ+ Action Plan.
5. My vision for promoting equality and social justice through the lens of culture, including the arts, is set out in the draft "Priorities for Culture, 2024-2030" strategy, which I launched for consultation on 23 May. The strategy outlines a clear set of priorities which focus on promoting equality and social justice. The ambition is to create a culture which is inclusive, accessible and diverse - a culture which brings communities together.
6. The Welsh Government is committed to respecting, protecting and fulfilling everyone's right to equitable inclusion in their choice of cultural activities. We want all people to feel valued and represented in our cultural and arts organisations. We want to address barriers to participation - whether they be physical, perceived, or financial - and take action to tackle inequalities and discrimination.
7. The Welsh Government supports the work already happening across our culture sector to embrace the values of cultural democracy and to support cultural rights. Recognising the diversity and interpretation of Welsh culture is important in enabling greater access to culture, including the arts. The Spotlight Survey 2022 highlighted the wide range of targeted provision across both local and national

museums in Wales for audiences with protected characteristics. Events, exhibitions and activities focusing on age (young and older people), Welsh speakers and people living with dementia are most widespread. Equality on the basis of ethnicity, disability, LGBTQ+, gender are also consistently targeted in programming. The Culture Grant Scheme for Grassroots Organisations has facilitated more than 50 cultural groups and organisations in accessing Welsh Government funding. The funding has enabled these groups to create, engage and participate in cultural activities which are meaningful to their communities and groups.

8. Our cultural arm's length bodies are key to my vision for supporting equality and social justice. For example, the Arts Council of Wales and Amgueddfa Cymru – Museum Wales have co-produced a Widening Engagement Action Plan. Widening engagement is about Cultural Democracy - people and communities being empowered to shape and inform their own arts and cultural experiences and to be co-producers and co-creators in arts and culture which reflects their lived experience.
9. Also, our local libraries in Wales are open and free to all. In addition to books, magazines, and newspapers, libraries provide access to wi-fi and IT equipment for those who are digitally excluded, and library staff provide help and support to people who lack confidence in accessing digital services. Many libraries also provided 'warm spaces' to support people through the cost-of-living crisis. Libraries provide a range of activities for children and families, carers and people experiencing loneliness including refugees and migrants. For example, Swansea Central Library is a 'library of sanctuary'. The service is committed to raising awareness of the issues facing people in the asylum system, offering support and participation opportunities and contributing to a culture of welcome in the wider community. The Library of Sanctuary award recognises and celebrates the libraries which go above and beyond to show solidarity and welcome.

### **Equality, Race and Disability Evidence Units**

10. The Equality, Race and Disability Evidence Units were established in January 2022 as a Programme for Government commitment.
11. The vision of the Evidence Units is to improve the availability, quality, granularity, and accessibility of equalities evidence to enable decision-makers across Wales to develop better informed policies and measure their impact. Many of the Evidence Units' projects are therefore long-term and aimed at fundamentally improving the equalities evidence base.
12. The Evidence Units are committed to co-production, wherever possible and appropriate, in developing equalities evidence. The Evidence Units work with people with lived experience and those who use equality evidence to understand their needs for analysis and evidence in order to help shape the way information is prioritised and disseminated. The Evidence Units encourage people and organisations to get involved in shaping and delivering their programmes of evidence and research projects.

13. The Evidence Units have been established and strengthened through recruitment of staff and developing and publishing the Equalities Evidence Strategy. They are now in their second year, with a number of projects up and running and/or having been delivered. In the Evidence Units' first full year (2023-24), they have supported policymaking and delivered evidence to support policy decisions, for example undertaking additional analysis of the Census providing breakdown of all key Census data by ethnicity, which is central to measuring the impact of the Anti-racist Wales Action Plan.

### **Fuel poverty and the Warm Homes Programme**

14. The level of fuel poverty in Wales is deeply concerning and we all have a responsibility to improve the lives of those in, or at risk of falling into, fuel poverty.

15. The best way to tackle fuel poverty is to get more money into peoples' pockets. The UK government clearly has a key role through the benefits system and we can do our bit in improving access to benefits and maximising income through initiatives such as Claim What's Yours. We are delivering against our plan, Tackling Fuel Poverty 2021 – 2035 and will be working with stakeholders to develop energy efficiency-based interim targets aligned to our next Low Carbon Delivery Plan.

16. Since June 2022 we have allocated more than £5.5m funding to enable the Fuel Bank Foundation to introduce a national Fuel Voucher and Heat Fund scheme in Wales. The scheme has provided support to eligible households who pre-pay for their fuel and are at risk of disconnection. This includes the provision of fuel vouchers for homes with prepayment meters and deliveries of oil or gas for those not connected to the mains gas network.

17. We launched our new £30m per year Warm Homes Nest scheme on 1 April. It will continue to act as the Welsh Government's primary mechanism to tackle fuel poverty for homeowners and households renting from private landlords.

18. The Warm Homes scheme aims to reduce the number of low-income households living in cold, damp homes through the installation of energy efficiency measures and low carbon heating solutions. It will take a fabric, worst and low carbon first approach, to improve the long-term energy efficiency of the least thermally efficient low-income households in Wales. Eligible households will receive a bespoke measure of packages to insulate and decarbonise their home leading to a reduction in their energy bills to move them out of fuel poverty.

19. My officials have been working with our contractors, local authorities and other partners to ensure the new demand-led scheme is complementary to other energy efficiency and fuel poverty schemes, to leverage as much funding as possible into Wales from GB wide schemes and ensure support is available to those most in need.

20. The scheme will also deliver a comprehensive energy advice service for everyone in Wales, providing information on the steps people can take themselves to reduce their energy bills. It will have an important role in

understanding each household's individual circumstances and supporting them to access the most appropriate scheme for their needs.

### **Child poverty**

21. Cabinet Ministers remain committed to developing their policies through a poverty and equality lens and identifying opportunities to deliver better shared outcomes on reducing poverty and inequality in the longer term.
22. On 23 January 2024 Welsh Government published a revised Child Poverty Strategy. The Strategy sets out our ambitions for the long term and outlines how we will work across Government and with partners to maximise the impact of the levers available to us, including our convening powers. It provides a framework through which we can deliver policies and programmes which support the outcomes we want for our children and young people both now and in the future.
23. The Strategy was developed following pre-consultation engagement with over 3,200 children, young people and families with lived experience of poverty and the organisations which support them, as well as a formal consultation. The clear message back was we have the right objectives and priorities for tackling poverty, and the focus should be on delivering against them.
24. We have sought independent expert advice from academic Professor Rod Hick from Cardiff University to review our draft monitoring framework and provide independent advice on our proposed national poverty indicators, measures and data sets to monitor and demonstrate transparent accountability in reporting on our progress in tackling poverty. We will be working with the Child Poverty Strategy External Reference Group to test the framework prior to publication later this year.
25. We will continue to produce a full progress report against the Strategy every three years, as required under the Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010. The next update will be in 2025, when the monitoring framework will form a key part of this progress report as will involving people with lived experience, including children and young people, in telling us whether we are achieving progress against the Strategy.

### **Benefits Charter**

26. The approach to implementing the Welsh Benefits Charter is a co-operative, phased approach as agreed by the Partnership Council for Wales. A steering group has been established to develop and oversee an implementation plan which will turn the commitments in the Charter into practical action. Reflecting the collective nature of the ambition for person-centred, inclusive design and delivery of Welsh Benefits the members of the steering group were carefully selected to ensure a strong Local Government presence along with Third Sector organisations, with experience of supporting people who claim benefits and experts in the design and delivery of public services. This will ensure an implementation plan which is both achievable and practical with ensuring individual's access their financial entitlements as its priority.

27. The initial work will concentrate on three key benefits (Council Tax Reduction Scheme, Free School Meals and Schools Essentials Grant) allowing us to build on existing good practice, develop flexible person-centred solutions and identify opportunities and risks before we roll out to further Welsh Benefits and payments.
28. The Welsh Benefits Charter contains commitments relating to the design and delivery of Welsh Benefits which means it is primarily relevant to Local Authorities and not all public bodies in Wales. However, we envisage other public bodies will have a key role to play in encouraging people to take-up their financial entitlements even if they have not signed up to the commitments in the Charter as yet.
29. The WLGA and local authorities have been involved at all levels in every stage of the development of the Welsh Benefits Charter. All 22 local authority Leaders endorsed and signed up to the Charter at the Partnership Council for Wales meeting in November 2023 and all local authority Chief Executives have nominated a Senior Responsible Officer to drive the work forward in their own authority. Through this strong collaborative approach LAs are demonstrating their commitment to deliver the improvements to their administration of Welsh benefits and achieve the outcomes in the Charter.

### **Public Services Ombudsman report on Gypsy and Traveller sites**

30. Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people are amongst the most marginalised people in society and face significant inequality. The Welsh Government accepts all the recommendations of the report from the Public Services Ombudsman. Four of the recommendations were due for completion within a month of publication, these have all been completed and the Public Service Ombudsman office have been informed.
31. We are on track to complete the remaining two recommendations by 21 July and 21 October respectively.
32. Whilst there was a delay in approving Local Authorities Cycle 2 Gypsy Traveller Accommodation Assessments (GTAA's), both Denbighshire and Conwy's Cycle 2 GTAA have been approved. Local Authorities remain under a statutory duty to meet any outstanding need which has been identified in their current GTAA. To date 13 Cycle 2 GTAA's have been approved.
33. Officials are in the process of rolling out a programme of scrutiny to ensure all local authorities are addressing their site provisions in their areas. The Welsh Government will use its powers to ensure local authorities comply with the Housing (Wales) Act 2014.
34. To improve the quality of life for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families, £3.44 million is available for the Gypsy and Traveller Sites Capital Grant in 2024/25. Local authorities can use the grant to support site development. It can be used

for refurbishing existing accommodation, constructing new pitches and improving the sustainability of sites for residents, and other capital expenditure related to improving sites as well as fund either residential sites or transit sites.

35. The first capital grant bidding window is now closed and officials are considering all of the bids. Five bids were received in the first bidding window. All applications will be expected to explain how the development will align with the Welsh Government's 'Designing Gypsy and Traveller Sites' guidance. Officials continue to make sure Local Authorities across Wales are aware of their obligations to meet the need identified in their GTAAs, and of the grant. A second bidding window will open in coming weeks.