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Sam Rowlands MS
Temporary Chair
Senedd Health and Social Care Committee

September 2024

Dear Chair

Thank you for your letter of 22 August on behalf of the Health and Social Care Committee, in which you ask for NSPCC's views on whether a mandatory reporting duty on individuals should be included within the Health and Social Care Bill.

The NSPCC believes that reporting child abuse is essential and advocates for people with any worries or concerns about possible abuse of children to reach out and share them – with us through the NSPCC Helpline, with the statutory safeguarding partners in social care, policing and health. We want to see increased reporting so children and young people experiencing (or at risk of) abuse can be identified, supported and the abuse prevented or stopped.

As you are aware, the current duty to report children at risk in Wales, as introduced in the 2014 Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act, places a duty on local authority statutory partners to report any suspicions that a child is experiencing or at risk of abuse, neglect or other kinds of harm to the local authority. Across the organisations who are statutory partners, this duty encompasses professionals' suspicions, as well as professionals witnessing, receiving a disclosure or observing signs of all forms of abuse and neglect. The NSPCC thinks there needs to be a full analysis and evaluation by Welsh Government of the impact of this duty, before decisions are made on introducing duties on wider groups of individuals. This should examine whether the organisational duty to report has led to an increase in reporting, greater identification of children at risk, more children receiving improved responses to concerns raised about abuse and neglect and, ultimately, whether the duty has been effective in safeguarding children from harm.

At NSPCC, our priority is to prevent children experiencing abuse, for action to be taken to protect them and, where abuse and neglect has occurred, to stop further harm and trauma. We are clear that, should Welsh Government amend the current regime of mandatory reporting in Wales to extend it to a wider range of individuals, this must be within a context of further support and investment in the child protection system. Reporting is essential to uncovering abuse but should not be an end in itself – a child protection response that prioritises the safeguarding of the child or young person is vital.

The following considerations are crucial for ensuring reporting is one part of a wider child protection response:

- The key objective should be ensuring a child-centred response which results in children receiving the right support to stop the abuse and to recover.

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EVERY CHILDHOOD IS WORTH FIGHTING FOR

National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC). Noddwr Brenhinol: Ei Mawrhydi'r Frenhines. Llywydd: Ei Huchelder Brenhinol Iarlles Wessex. Sefydlwyd yn 1884. Ymgorfforwyd gan Siartr Frenhinol RC000374. Rhif elusen gofrestredig 216401 (Cymru a Lloegr) a SC037717 (Yr Alban).

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- More children who are suffering abuse or at risk of abuse must be known to the authorities. Measures to encourage reporting are positive because they reiterate to adults that abuse of children cannot be tolerated or ignored and help increase awareness of the signs of abuse.
- If such measures result in a higher number of disclosures and reports, resources should be available to enable agencies and services to develop productive relationships with children and families. Lack of resources should never prevent children who are being abused being identified by the authorities, protected and accessing the support they need.
- Everybody should be clear about their role in protecting children. All those working with children (whether employees or volunteers) should be clear that keeping children safe from abuse is paramount. Individuals must know their responsibilities, understand the potential signs and indicators of abuse and clear about what to do if they suspect abuse.
- Professionals should also have training so they are able to confidently and accurately identify signs of abuse or neglect. They also need to build on their skills of working relationally with children, including understanding of trauma and the impact that grooming may have on the ability of children to understand what they have experienced, recognise it as abuse and share with adults.
- Institutions must be responsible for failures to protect children made by the individuals who work for or with them, and for their own organisational failures including poor safeguarding policies and processes; failing to recruit the right personnel and failing to train and support staff appropriately to fulfil their duties to keep children safe. This needs to be supported by a strong inspection regime across all settings.
- Children must have opportunities to engage with support in safe spaces without the fear of always being reported to the authorities. This may require exceptions in any system of reporting that allows professionals engaging with children, for example in therapeutic work, in ways that are child centred and allows children to retain control. Childline is one example where thresholds to report concerns about child abuse are deliberately high, in order to provide children with a service that allows them to feel safe to talk about their experiences (with the exception of situations where the abuser is in a position of power, where that confidentiality is compromised).

We note that Welsh Government is engaged in a programme of work to strengthen professionals' duty to report in its current form and would encourage this Committee, as well as the Children, Young People and Education Committee, to continue to monitor the progress of this work.

I trust that this information is of use to the Committee in its scrutiny of the Bill. If the NSPCC can be of any further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely



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