



Oxfam Cymru written evidence for the Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee of the National Assembly for Wales public consultation, as part of its inquiry into Poverty in Wales.

Strand 1: Poverty and Inequality – September 2014

1. Oxfam Cymru welcomes the opportunity to give evidence to the inquiry. Over the last decade we have accrued a mass of experience in working with partners to help people lift themselves out of poverty and build sustainable livelihoods. We work at grass roots level all over Walesⁱ, while campaigning at national level for positive change.
2. Our projects work directly with people experiencing poverty – most of the evidence given here reflects their voices and their concerns as well as what we are told by our local workers and partners. Oxfam would like to see people living in poverty actively engaged in designing innovative delivery strategies based on the outcomes that matter to them. We would be happy to facilitate an oral evidence session for the Committee with representatives from our partners including local workers, peer mentors and participants.

How effectively the Tackling Poverty Action Plan, Strategic Equality Plan and other government strategies work together;

3. Oxfam welcomes the publication of Building Resilient Communities – Taking Forward the Tackling Poverty Action Plan (TPAP), and recognises the collaborative and positive steps that have been taken. However, TPAP's weakness remains its limited analysis of the key drivers of poverty and its consequently narrow ambitions for change. While it is true that education is vital to help prevent aspects of poverty and that people can be helped to be more work-ready, the fundamental problem is the chronic lack of decent jobs in Wales.
4. Poverty cannot be viewed just as a segmented problem for government to fix, nor will solutions mostly focused on individual development address the substantive issue. Even if every workless Welsh person were highly skilled and motivated, he/she would still be competing in a weak jobs market characterised by low pay, insecurity and poor conditions. Just this week, research from BBC Walesⁱⁱ found that eight Welsh councils were using zero hours contracts.
5. *“For the last few years I have gone from zero hours contracts that never paid enough to live, to temporary contracts to jobs where your hours were cut after a few weeks. The only work round here is agency stuff with no security but you feel you have to take what’s offered or lose your benefits. Every time you start over it’s a knockback and no way can you plan ahead, buy a house, anything like that. It’s like being stuck on a treadmill.”*
Lee, single dad, South Wales Valleys
6. The scale of the problem calls for a bold long-term re-alignment of the economy that joins up **all** aspects of Welsh Government policy. We need to find new ways of building a vibrant

'foundational economy' that reflects basic human needs such as food and energy. A great opportunity presents itself with the advent of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Bill. This legislation has the potential to make the crucial links between environmental, economic and social policy.

7. To ensure we work towards a decent standard of living for everyone, while living within environmental limits, Oxfam advocates for – an economic model known as the 'doughnut'. The 'Scottish Doughnut' was published this summerⁱⁱⁱ – the 'Welsh Doughnut' will be available in December 2014 and will form a major part of our vision for the Wellbeing of Future Generations Bill. A road map of how we can build sustainable development within environmental and social boundaries could be the starting point for genuinely progressive policy to turn around the Welsh economy.
8. With regard to the Strategic Equality Plan, we welcome the leadership Welsh Government has shown in ensuring Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs) are a statutory requirement of all policies, process and the budget. However, we are concerned about the quality and effectiveness of EIA at a local government level particularly in the assessment of budget cuts.
9. In times of austerity public engagement by public bodies is more important than ever, there is scope for better involvement of people and communities in the decommissioning and commissioning of services through co-production principles; improving the design, efficiency and delivery of public services and in achieving and evaluating service delivery.
10. *"Housing services and environmental services are much worse due to council cutbacks. The grass only gets cut once or twice a year now and the lack of upkeep of local areas is really obvious. Bus services are much worse with fewer buses running."*
Susan, job seeker, North Wales
11. For example, when Rhondda Cynon Taff County Borough Council decided to implement £4.5m of cuts to nursery education they failed in their statutory duty to have regard to the wider implications of the cuts to local employment, the effects on poorer families and worsening educational standards. Local parents had to raise cash for a Judicial Review in May 2014 which found in their favour and halted the cuts.
12. The commitment from the Welsh Government to implement a socio-economic equality duty on public authorities in Wales could be an excellent first step to ensure that government policies and private sector actions have a genuinely positive impact on the most disadvantaged Welsh people and the communities in which they live.

13. Placing a socio-economic duty on public authorities, either as part of the Strategic Equality Plan or Wellbeing of Future Generations Bill would help ensure that state support is conditional on achieving genuine social [and environmental] returns. The duty could be enforced by the independent Equalities Commissioner or Future Generations Commissioner who would ensure spending decisions are poverty proofed and communities wishing to challenge Government policies and private sector action that do not contribute to sustainable development and socio-economic equality are supported.
14. Oxfam welcomes the recent commitment by Welsh Government to revise and update the 2011 Refugee Inclusion Strategy and Action Plan. This is particularly important as many of the delivery agencies mentioned in the Action Plan are no longer supported by public funds and UK Government has cut statutory provision of in-person support choosing instead telephone support via Migrant Help. This has placed a serious burden on third sector support agencies and increased the risk of people becoming destitute. The TPAP makes no mention of the Refugee Inclusion Strategy and Action Plan. We would like to see the welfare of asylum seekers and refugees integrated into the TPAP.
15. As part of procurement and economic regeneration strategies the Welsh Government could do more to strengthen the demand for businesses that offer high quality jobs. Across all sectors employers need to be actively encouraged (for example by linking public sector incentives and procurement to action and outcomes) to pay a living wage, develop low paid staff, create work to learn cultures and offer clear career progression paths.
16. Oxfam recommends that clear references are made in the TPAP on how Welsh Government economic development strategies are designed to tackle poverty through the creation of 'good' jobs in areas that need them.

How legislation, policy and budgets targeted at tackling poverty and reducing inequality are co-ordinated and prioritised across the Welsh Government.

17. We would like to see a greater emphasis on the "invest to save" agenda and to make sure that the mixture of spending from local authorities, Welsh Government, Westminster and Europe works together in an effective way for those who are living in poverty. We must use **all** of the resources available to us to remove barriers to inclusion and reduce inequalities. Preventative spending can reduce costs long term.
18. The majority of actions within the TPAP are targeted at geographically deprived communities to allow resources to be focussed most effectively. It is important to recognise that a significant number of people living in poverty live outside these areas of benefit. Programme based solutions have limited reach and are highly dependent on additional spending. Service redesign

in key devolved areas would embed social justice in our systems and institutions and require less programme-based spending in the longer term.

The impacts of poverty, particularly destitution and extreme poverty, on different groups of people;

19. The TPAP lacks any detail about the role that demographic factors, gender, ethnicity, culture, age, etc, play in people's experience of poverty and how it might influence solutions. TPAP tends to assume that everyone's experience of poverty is the same when this is clearly not the case. A vast range of evidence suggests that experiences of poverty and resulting livelihood strategies are greatly influenced by demographics.
20. In addition TPAP implies that 'poor people' are a fixed group separate from the rest of 'us'. Poverty is a state which people move in and out of with the risk of poverty changing over the life course. This emphasises the need for a dynamic, adaptable approach with suitable interventions for each stage of a person's life.
21. Oxfam works with some of the most vulnerable people in Welsh society, determined by measurable criteria such as social exclusion, access to social and economic capital and employment status. This evidence is only a summary – if asked to supply oral testimony, we can facilitate direct evidence to the Committee from our partners including local workers, peer mentors and participants.
22. The groups our partners work with include:
 - People with substance/alcohol abuse issues: e.g. The Wallich in Ebbw Vale;
 - Families with children in Nurture classes: e.g. Glyncoch Community Regeneration in RCT & Duffryn Community Link in Newport;
 - People with learning difficulties and mental illness: e.g. Caia Park Partnership in Wrexham;
23. *"The letter said 'you have failed your employment support medical and you are not going to get any benefit.' I remember holding it and shaking. Later, an appeal said I should get the money, but in the meantime I had nothing – literally nothing – to live on.
My fridge was empty, there was nothing in the cupboard but some salt and two tea bags. Then my housing benefit got cut – they thought that because I got no benefit I was in a job. So then I had no cash for electric or gas either. I walked the streets, hungry, looking at all the food in shop windows and thinking – what am I going to do?
The food bank was a lifeline, but the whole thing set me back mentally – the stress of it. I felt so upset, worthless and desperate."*

Nia, 22, participant from North East Wales with mental health problems,

 - Older people in rented accommodation: e.g. Denbighshire Council for Voluntary Services in Rhyl;
 - Young people not in education, training or work: e.g. Sylfaen Cymunedol in Caernarfon.
 - The long-term unemployed: e.g. Dove Workshop in the Upper Neath Valley;

24. *“Most of our people really want to work, but the jobs are just not there. Or else they are part-time hours or on zero hours contracts, or temporary, which leaves people worse off in the long run with the benefits they lose and the uncertainty in their lives.”*

Advice worker, South Wales

25. *“They said I was capable of working. I want to work, but there are many days I can’t leave the house. I felt under pressure from the Job Centre, I was threatened with sanctions, so much that I stopped going there. I just couldn’t deal with it. So I stopped claiming and got no money. I didn’t know you could get hardship money and anyway I was afraid to ask. I had bad toothache, but wasn’t a claimant so couldn’t get treatment. I know it sounds strange, but I was ill and I couldn’t cope and was on a downward spiral. So we lived off my mum’s pension. We have no central heating, so we rely on coal. But we couldn’t buy coal and food, so the house went unheated all winter.”*

Jeff, participant from Swansea valleys with mental health problems

- **Refugees and asylum seekers**

26. Our Sanctuary in Wales project is aimed at supporting and advising women refugees and asylum seekers in the four dispersal areas in Wales – Swansea, Cardiff, Newport and Wrexham. Of all the people we help, this group is closest to genuine destitution and absolute poverty.
27. Travel and childcare are the main barriers preventing asylum seeking and refugee women from accessing the training, work experience and community support they so badly need. We recommend that the Welsh Government look at ways of extending existing services to these women and supporting their efforts to build new lives.
28. UK asylum policy has increasingly restricted asylum seekers' access to welfare support, both while their application is being processed and if they are refused. Over recent years, there have been growing concerns about the scale and impact of destitution among refused asylum seekers. There is a serious lack of statistical data on the numbers of destitute asylum seekers in Wales. There is clear evidence however^{iv}, of the survival strategies adopted by destitute asylum seekers in Wales. Their overwhelming lack of institutional, social and economic resources denies them a sustainable livelihood, and results in a life that is robbed of dignity and unacceptable by human right standards.
29. The Welsh Government should follow the lead taken by pledged supporters of the City of Sanctuary^v movement, such as Swansea City Council that have passed a motion against destitution. There should be a clear principle that no-one should be destitute in today's Wales.

For more information please contact Carol Owen / Hayley Richards:

Cowen@oxfam.org.uk / hrichards@oxfam.org.uk

Oxfam Cymru, 5/7 St Mary Street, Cardiff CF10 1AT - Tel: 0300 200 1269

ⁱ <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/cymru/poverty-in-wales>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-29128623>

ⁱⁱⁱ Oxfam research reports: Malcolm Sayers & Katherine Trebeck (July 2014) The Scottish Doughnut – A safe and just operating space for Scotland <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/The-Scottish-Doughnut-A-safe-and-just-operating-space-for-Scotland-323371>

^{iv} Coping with Destitution: Survival and livelihood strategies of refused asylum seekers living in the UK. Oxfam Research Report by Centre for Migration Policy Research, Swansea University 2011 <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/coping-with-destitution-survival-and-livelihood-strategies-of-refused-asylum-se-121667>

^v <http://www.cityofsanctuary.org/category/tags/destitution-section-4>