

Cross Party Group on Poverty - 6 May 2020, virtual meeting



Attendees:

Amal Beyroudy – Women Connect First
Rachel Cable – Oxfam Cymru (secretariat)
Carmel Condon – Helen Mary Jones MS support staff
Emma Curtis – Office of The Children's Commissioner
Tom Davies – The Children's Society
Ryland Doyle – Mike Hedges MS support staff
Alicia Evans – Red Cross
Amy Evans – Colegau Cymru
Claire Evans – Cardiff Metropolitan University
Steffan Evans – Bevan Foundation
Sarah Germain – FareShare Cymru
John Griffiths MS (Chair)
Huw Irranca-Davies MS
Susan Lloyd Selby – Trussell Trust
Katie Palmer – Food Sense Wales
Jenny Rathbone MS
Mia Rees – Suzy Davies MS support staff
Sarah Rees – Bethan Sayed MS support staff
Carol Wardman – Church in Wales
Therese Warwick – Cafod
Jamie Westcombe – Equality and Human Rights Commission
Ginger Wiegand – Ethnic Youth Support Team
Liz Williams – Samaritans Cymru
Lynda Young – Police Liaison Unit

Meeting note

The Chair, John Griffiths MS, welcomed members to the first meeting of the CPG in the newly titled 'Welsh Parliament'. JG set the context, and highlighted the opportunity presented by the Coronavirus to re-consider how we tackle poverty and inequality, both in the immediate, and in the longer term. This note is set out thematically.

Immediate issues presented by the Coronavirus

The first half of the meeting was focused on the immediate issues facing people living in poverty during the Coronavirus pandemic, and how authorities and charities are responding.

Chair of Wales' anti-poverty coalition, Rachel Cable, provided an overview of the work of the anti-poverty coalition, and other significant developments. This included:

- Accessibility, publicity and flexibility of the Welsh Government's Discretionary Assistance Fund (DAF);
- Alternative provisions for families in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM);
- Issues relating to digital inclusion facing families and individuals in relation to accessing school work, benefits, advice, support for wellbeing and mental health, and isolation;
- A [letter published today](#), organised by Oxfam and signed by over 100 organisations, highlighting the growing poverty crisis facing carers;
- And a letter published in April 2020, organised by the Women's Equality Network Wales, and signed by a range of organisations, highlighting the distinct impact the Coronavirus is having on women.

Free school meals and food aid - The group discussed FSM, and Jenny Rathbone MS praised Cardiff Council for their grab bag scheme. Concerns were raised about what support is in place for vulnerable children who might not be going to the 'hubs' which have been established, highlighting that vulnerable families maybe less likely to

present to a new facility, or to trust support workers who are new to them. It was suggested that local authorities (LA) should share experiences so best practice can be highlighted. It was noted that adverse childhood experiences will be being exacerbated by the virus, and safeguarding models should be amended to reflect this.

Huw Irranca-Davies MS described the experience of his constituency, which spans two LAs, where there are different arrangements in place for FSM. In one area, FSM parcels are being hand delivered – a model which HID praised for its wider benefits, for example, further contact for vulnerable families with support staff. Steffan Evans reported that 17 of the 22 LAs have already introduced, or have agreed to introduce, cash in lieu of FSM. The five remaining are providing vouchers or food parcels. The group recognised the potential value in having a mixed approach, for example, for families who may not have bank accounts. SE highlighted concerns about food parcels, for example, that families may not be able to afford the gas or electricity to cook the food that is provided, and that the long-standing stigma associated with FSM remains, and is not addressed through vouchers.

Concerns for sanctuary seekers were raised, for example, that dialogue is ongoing about loading FSM money onto Aspen cards for asylum seekers, although progress is too slow. It was also reported that The Children's Commissioner is receiving a range of concerns relating to FSM (content of parcels, and what is being offered across LAs), as well as exams, children's and young people's educational needs, and mental health.

Katie Palmer outlined the food aid response, and reiterated the calls for a coordinated food aid task force, to be led by the Welsh Government, and involving all relevant departments and sectors. KP reported that parts of Wales are performing very well in response to food aid (in its widest sense – food banks, FSM, deliveries for people shielding etc), and that an audit across LAs would be welcome. Susan Lloyd-Selby reported that across the UK Trussell Trust foodbanks have seen an 81% increase in demand, and for children this rises to 122%. The data in Wales is likely to be slightly higher.

Carers - HID welcomed the [open letter outlining the link between care and poverty](#), and urged the group to put its weight behind the calls, and in particular on UK Government to improve social security support for unpaid carers. HID argued that swift action is needed to properly reward those working in the care sector, and in parallel, work to professionalise the sector. The group recognised the spotlight that is being shone on this issue, and how public support for carers is at an all time high.

Emergency on the ground response - HID discussed the emergency response, and reflected on the importance of a better coordinated anti-poverty sector – particular in delivering emergency response, in order to mitigate against any potential cross-overs and / or competitiveness between organisations for resources.

DAF and social security – Various members of the group raised concerns that many people may not be accessing the benefits that they are entitled to, particularly if they are new to the social security system, and may not know what they are eligible for. It was reported that data from the DAF team that shows a large spike in claims, but mostly from people who have already used DAF in the past – which suggests that the message is not getting to people who have not previously accessed DAF. The new flexibility in the DAF was welcomed, but that publicity still needs to be improved, as many people still do not know it is available.

Housing - SE welcomed the prohibition of housing evictions during this crisis, but questioned what is planned beyond lockdown, when people may have unmanageable rent arrears, and urged the Welsh Government to provide clarity for tenants as a matter of urgency.

Digital inclusion – Various members of the group highlighted concerns with digital inclusion, and in addition to the provision of physical equipment and access to wifi or data, concern that parents are having to grapple with an array of new tools, placing an additional admin load on families. Particular concern was raised about support for refugees and asylum seekers - digital exclusion for people with low income or No Recourse to Public Funds, and highlighted that this digital divide could further disadvantage children who are already behind.

Lynne Neagle MS welcomed the announcement on equipment for home learning to help address the digital divide, and reported her committee's conversation about how this impacts on vulnerable children, and how they might access their social worker for example.

Violence against women and girls – Claire Evans highlighted the impact that the Coronavirus is having on people stuck in abusive relationships, and pointed to the huge increase in advice sought from domestic abuse helplines. She further highlighted the urgent need to support vulnerable children impacted by these situations. It was reported that the EHRC is due to meet with the Deputy Minister and Chief Whip this week and will highlight these concerns there, as well as concerns relating to video hearings and disabled people.

Building back better

The Chair introduced the second half of the meeting by highlighting the different mechanisms and forums discussing how we 'build back better'. The key fora for the CPG's concerns are the [Welsh Government's work being led by Jeremy Miles MS](#), future thinking being led by the Future Generations Commissioner, and the Institute for Welsh Affairs' (IWA) Re-Thinking Wales series. The group discussed what practices or policies we would value keeping beyond Coronavirus.

Coordination – The leadership of some LAs during the crisis response was praised, for example, in connecting community groups in different regions, and responding to local pressure points, stepping in to offer immediate practical support and coordination. This was key for food banks in particular. The experience of those LAs who had responded to the recent flooding meant they were able to act with speed, decisiveness and flexibility.

Community and localised response – The importance of community groups was recognised as a huge strength, as well as support received from government. Localised understanding of different medical and cultural needs is hugely important, and should be recognised in longer term policy making. The grants to small organisations, being administered by the Wales Council for Voluntary Action, were welcomed, and the importance of supporting grassroots organisations was noted.

No Recourse to Public Funds – It was suggested that the sector should share evidence with the Welsh Government, in order to make the case to the Home Office that NRPF should be reviewed urgently.

BAME and migrant communities – The group noted the undervaluing of the caring and gig economies, and how ethnic minorities tend to be over-represented in these sectors, and how the Coronavirus offers a chance to 'reset' to ensure all these workers are paid at least the Real Living Wage. In the event of a recession it was noted that any scapegoating should be combatted where jobs might be scarce. The group noted the [new 'Privilege Café'](#) hosting online sessions and members were encouraged to join a session.

DAF and social security – The work on developing a Welsh benefits system should be continued, and flexing Wales' muscle on the social security powers it already has should highlight the impact a devolved approach can have for the people who need it most.

Next steps

It was agreed that Oxfam Cymru would draft a paper on behalf of the group on 'building back better' to be circulated for comment / input, with the aim of submitting it into Jeremy Miles MS' work, the Future Generations Commissioner, and the IWA's thinking.

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