

Cross Party Group on Poverty – Thursday 23rd July 2020 - Virtual Meeting

Attendees: John Griffiths MS (Chair), Jeremy Miles MS and Counsel General (Guest Speaker), Andrew Bettridge (John Griffiths MS Staff), Dan Roberts (Wales Coop), Carol Wardman (Church in Wales), Susie Ventris-Field (Welsh Centre for International Affairs), Sarah Way (SRCDC), Dr Claire Evans (Cardiff Metropolitan University), Delyth Jewell MS, Maureen Howell (Deputy Director, Prosperous Futures), Jamie Westcombe (Equality Human Rights), Stefan Evans (Bevan Foundation), Susan Lloyd-Selby (Trussell Trust), Emma Holmes (Public Health Dietetics), Katie Palmer (Food Sense Wales) Tom Davies (Children's Society), Sarah Rees (Bethan Sayed MS Staff), Duncan Holtom (People and Work), Cheryl Martin (Children in Wales), Ioan Bellin (Helen Mary Jones MS Staff), Neil Binnell (South Riverside Community Development Centre), Lynne Neagle MS, Mark Isherwood MS, Ryland Doyle (Mike Hedges MS Staff)



Apologies: Dawn Bowden MS, Suzy Davies MS

Meeting notes

- 1) **Chair's Remarks** – John (Griffiths) gave a short introduction to Jeremy and about Building Back Better. He said this meant engaging with different groups and communities across Wales and building up an evidence-based approach in the recovery to Covid-19. He said the pandemic had highlighted many inequalities including those of race, social class, age, gender etc.
- 2) **Opening Remarks from Guest Speaker** – The Counsel General started by echoing the chair's comments about Covid-19 exacerbating existing inequalities in Wales and in many cases making them worse – both from health and an economical point of view. Groups which were finding it harder included BAME communities, women and young people. This was because in many cases the types of sectors they were working in and lockdown was having more of an affect on them. He said this will be taken account of by the Welsh Government in their approach to rebuilding the economy in Wales post-Covid.

He said there will be with some certainty, high levels of unemployment – but couldn't at this stage say how high it could be and what kind of pattern it might follow. He did warn that it would be higher than the last economic crisis (2008) and it may have more of an impact on certain sectors compared to others. The Counsel General said people between the ages of 16 to 24 were vulnerable to the economic impact of Covid-19 – but also said we mustn't lose sight of people in their 50s and 60s who might be at risk of losing their jobs.

He said there was a link to sectors which had been in lockdown and low paid jobs – and for many of these, the ability to work from home was not an option. Retail, Social Care work were just two examples mentioned by the Counsel General. He said household incomes will take a hit which will have an impact on poverty and child poverty levels across Wales.

The Counsel General said these were not issues being dealt with in isolation and also spoke about the threat of a potential No-Deal Brexit on the Welsh economy. He added that Welsh Government were doing work to ensure public bodies had a socio-economic responsibility in the delivery of their services and said that would have a medium and long term in impact in the response to Covid-19. He ended his opening remarks by saying working groups and workstreams had been set up to look at how we deal with some of these challenges.

3) Questions & Answers to Guest Speaker

Round 1 – Lynne Neagle MS & Delyth Jewell MS

A) Lynne asked for reassurances that Welsh Government would be willing to take tough decisions in relation to the allocation of resources to ensure those most in need received them. She said this hadn't always been the case. She mentioned young people and her proposal to put in statutory measures to make sure young people are in education and training (if not in work) and whether the pandemic has made this idea more relevant than ever?

B) Delyth asked about how we can help young people overcome those lost months in their education due to the pandemic – in terms of their studies, their mental health and the interpersonal relationships they would form with other students and teachers when normally at school.

A) The Counsel General said there wasn't simply enough funding to do all the things the Welsh Government wanted to do and said there would need to be interventions at UK Government to help with that. In the initial response to Covid, he said Ministers were asked to allocate money from their existing budgets which could go centrally towards supporting the pandemic response at Welsh Government level. He said this was an ongoing process across Welsh Government so they knew what to prioritise in terms of resources as things developed.

B) The Counsel General explained the announcements from the Welsh Government's Education Secretary on increasing numbers in the teaching profession was part of the strategy for helping children who had lost out on months of education because of the lockdown. He said blended learning would be an important part of going forward – but also best practice in schools needed to be adopted universally.

Round 2 – Stefan Evans (Bevan Foundation) & Susie Ventris-Field (Welsh Centre for International Affairs)

C) Stefan asked about the barriers for people going into further education and particularly living costs that came with that. He said there was a lot more support for those going into higher education with loans and grants – but didn't feel this was the

case for FE. He said if we face youth unemployment problems going forward, finding ways to facilitate going into training and education was needed.

D) Susie asked about Brexit and said she felt this would lead to fewer opportunities for young people and mentioned the ERASMUS scheme. She said these schemes were still funded for a few more years and felt it was worth giving these a further push because they might give other pathways for young people.

C) The Counsel General recognised that historically all Governments of all colours had put more funding into further education. However he highlighted the need for more apprenticeships and opportunities where learners of all ages could do more short forms of training so they could make transitions between work in later life. He said universities need to do more in terms of reaching out to cohorts of people, who may not traditionally think about going into higher education. He also spoke about the importance of getting work experience and how that could boost employment prospects.

D) The Counsel General said he wasn't optimistic about a replacement for ERASMUS post-Brexit. He also said the UK Government's approach to negotiations weren't also factoring in the new challenges posed by Covid-19. He said there wasn't much evidence of them modifying their Brexit strategy. He said Welsh Government were trying to give people a clearer idea of what the implications of what Brexit and Covid combined meant for people in the everyday world and what the UK Government should be pressing for to address the challenges posed by both.

Round 3 – Katie Palmer (Food Sense Wales)

E) Katie said Covid had exposed a lot of the vulnerabilities in the food system - obesity and diabetes she mentioned as well as health conditions which put some people more at risk. She mentioned the employment practices in some of the food manufacturing plants, supply issues with queues at supermarket – but also the positives with some local level responses.

She said there was a disconnect between the production and consumption strategy and felt there was a lack of connection between different governmental departments. She mentioned some of the policy frameworks were good – including the duties councils had under the Environment Act, the Socio-Economic duties and the rights for children. Katie also said there was a real lack of local data so it was difficult to understand what was working and wasn't working in terms of the local food system.

E) The Counsel General said the response from supermarkets had been at the better end of things. He was encouraged in the uptake of people doing more of their food shopping in their local high streets. In terms of production and consumption, he agreed there needed to be more of a link – especially post Brexit and having a more joined up food ecology and shorting the supply chains.

He added the real and immediate challenge was about people being able to put food on their table and said Welsh Government had acted to address this with the free school meals and the support they'd given food banks. He accepted they haven't quite cracked the food systems issues to support food producers. He talked about the opportunities for a more cooperative model around food production and agreed to take some of Katie's specific points forward after the meeting.

Round 4 - Susan Lloyd-Selby (Trussell Trust)

F) Susan said the Trussell Trust in April saw an 89% increase in the number of people who couldn't afford the basics and over 100% increase in the number of children reliant on food aid. She said the organisation wanted to see an extension of the measures put in place during the crisis.

She also said the key was early intervention – so at the point people were in financial crisis – whether it be loss of income or a level of debt which was unsustainable. She asked about advice, support services and taking steps to join up some of these services and whether his team identified any opportunities to do this.

F) The Counsel General touched on the work Welsh Government had done with the organisation in terms of mapping the demand for food bank usage and also mentioned a visit to his own local foodbank in Neath which echoed the national picture regarding increased demand. He agreed that food wasn't simply the answer and the UK Government through the taxation and welfare system needed to give more remedial support in these areas.

He said there was challenges and opportunities for agencies and organisations to do more to make sure individuals/families got signposted or better made aware of the support and the services which were available to them so they were taken up to their fullest extent. He said there needed to be a joined-up approach at how we best do this.

Round 5 – Ioan Bellen (Office of Helen Mary Jones MS), Sarah Rees (Office of Bethan Sayed MS) and Sarah Way (SRCDC)

G) Ioan asked about the Shared Prosperity Fund and if there had been any discussions in the context of Covid and said it was important we got just as a good scheme as what we had from the EU to tackle poverty. He asked if this had been part of the Counsel General's discussions with the UK Government regarding Brexit.

H) Sarah spoke about a survey which surveyed 3,000 mothers and 77% responded there has been a real challenge to manage childcare and work during the pandemic. She said parents within her region were feeling a real impending pressure for when children return to school in September because there was little wraparound care. She said this meant women were haemorrhaging from the workplace in order to look after their children.

Secondly Sarah asked about if there had been discussions around a Universal Basic Income (UBI) in Welsh Government and if this could be targeted to groups like single parents and young people who were unemployed.

I) Sarah (Way) said she was working on a project which looked at in-work poverty, especially amongst the BAME community in Cardiff and the findings showed there was a lack of accessibility for women to ESOL (English as a Second Language) courses. She asked if Welsh Government's plans for Building Back Better would include ESOL.

G) The Counsel General said the last meeting with the UK Government he had on the Shared Prosperity Fund was at the end of February. The demand was for a full replacement of the previous EU funds and that they should be administered by the Welsh Government. He said if these demands were not met, we'd be in very difficult waters and it would be harder to tackle poverty. He said there was no expectation they'd be getting any detail on the Shared Prosperity Fund until the UK Government's Comprehensive Spending Review. He commented that replacement funds were even more crucial given the situation with the pandemic.

H) The Counsel General said the Government hoped to reinstate their childcare offer in September to relieve some of the pressures on parents. It was suspended in April to divert some funds in the short term to other areas to support the Covid response.

He said the First Minister was interested in seeing how UBI can work in a pilot setting. He said the case for it was an interesting one but not a straightforward one. He said the most important point was around devising a system, which gives most support to those who need it most.

I) The Counsel General said we should be looking at ESOL and he would take it away to look at this specific point.

Round 5 – Dan Roberts (Welsh Coop)

J) Dan asked how citizens can take ownership of the rebuilding process post-Covid and how we ensure the rebuilding process priorities community wealth building and focuses on assets and capital which is routed in the communities so we can lead to more resilient economies?

J) The Counsel General said there was opportunities in the care sector around the ownership structure and social enterprises and cooperative models could be encouraged here. He said there a need to look creatively at citizens engagement but this was not just the responsibility of Government but all organisations. He said stake in the outcome was also part of it. He said some parts of our economy where cooperative and social enterprise solutions would be a material part of the answer for some time. Certain levers which would help included procurement and said there was greater emphasis from the Welsh Government on building the

foundation economy and resilient local supply chains – particularly in response to Covid and Brexit.

Round 6 - Duncan Holtom (People and Work)

K) Duncan asked about the creative ways in which people could use their time as productively as possible whilst they waited for the labour market to return to some normality.

K) The Counsel General said some sectors would be rebounding relatively healthy but the sectors where young people were overly represented in sectors which had been hit hard by the pandemic. He said the test would be to make sure young people get the skills required to go into those sectors which do recover and having a targeted skills intervention to do that. And whilst other people's job prospects were not so certain to take other training options whilst they can.

He said he was pleased to see the package the UK Chancellor brought forward for youth job support – similar to the “Jobs Growth Wales package” and said he was pleased to that being used elsewhere. He said this needed to go in hand with a proactive skills development programme and we ensure progression through the workplace – getting a job but then being able to develop you skills further. He said it was important to tailor some of the UK Government interventions for the Welsh jobs market. He said the challenges weren't actually new but they'd been made far more acute and current because of the pandemic.

- 4) **Closing Remarks from Chair and Guest Speaker** – John thanked the Counsel General for attending, who encouraged people to continue to contribute to the conversation around “Building Back Better”. He said his team hoped to be in a position by September to put a report into the public domain with their findings and the Welsh Government's response to it.