

WRITTEN EVIDENCE PAPER TO THE CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Introduction

1. The purpose of this paper is to set out my priorities for the Communities and Children's portfolio. My priorities are to promote children's wellbeing: their physical, intellectual, emotional, social and behavioural development and welfare and to foster economic renewal and regeneration. The work of my department will be underpinned by a commitment to prevention and early intervention in line with the principles of the Well-being of Future Generations Act and the importance of taking a long term view.
2. My goal is to ensure all children have the best possible start in life and the opportunity to thrive and succeed. To help achieve this, I will be looking to deliver on the objectives of the Welsh Government's Child Poverty Strategy. I will also focus on addressing Adverse Childhood Experiences and the impact they can have in adult life.
3. The Labour Party manifesto set out a number of priority actions, that fall to my portfolio and which are relevant to the work of the Committee, which I will be taking forward:
 - A better deal on childcare
 - Flying Start
 - Families First (specifically the Team Around the Family model)
 - Looked After Children
 - Mitigate the effects of welfare reform
 - Bring forward legislation to remove the defence of reasonable punishment
 - Children's rights and participation
4. These priorities have clear synergies, and will be taken forward in line with wider portfolio activities which include our commitment to housing supply and regeneration, justice, the armed forces community and community safety. This includes developing a National Strategy to tackle gender-based violence, domestic abuse and sexual violence.

A better deal on childcare

5. I have been clear that we need to deliver a better childcare offer to help working parents, and support business and the economy. Parents have told us that the cost of childcare is one of the biggest challenges they face. We are committed to supporting and helping parents with both cost and flexibility. I am therefore, working on plans for the delivery of 30 hours a week, 48 weeks a year. We intend to engage with parents and stakeholders in developing the offer.

6. It is important that any new arrangements should deliver maximum benefits. Therefore we will be assessing how the new childcare offer fits with existing programmes, such as Flying Start and the Foundation Phase, to ensure smooth transitions between schemes.
7. It is also important that we have sufficient capacity in the system so we will also be looking at workforce development and business support for childcare providers.

Flying Start

8. I am strongly committed to the continuation of Flying Start. It has been a successful programme geographically targeted at children in deprived areas across Wales. It is an intensive programme working closely with children and families to give them the best start in life. Flying Start provides high quality early intervention services to over 36,000 children, improving their social, cultural and economic futures. We know from evaluations that this programme works, which is why I am committed to its continuation and development.

Families First

9. The approach taken by Families First and, in particular, the Team Around the Family can have a transformative effect on the lives of families. Evidence has shown it is building stronger, more resilient families and can increase the chances of long term positive outcomes for the next generation and beyond. Families First has resulted in a significant change in the way every local authority delivers family support. Multi-agency working is now recognised as essential, and the programme has improved the way agencies work together to support our most vulnerable families. Our family-focussed approach to assessing and tailoring family support is making a real difference to family outcomes and life chances are being improved as families become more confident, resilient and independent.

Looked After Children

10. My vision is that all children in care should have the same life chances as other children. We know that outcomes for looked after children do not compare favourably with other children and they are less likely to achieve good educational qualifications and have greater health and housing needs. These young people are more likely to become involved in substance misuse and come into contact with the criminal justice system.
11. Over the last two years the number of looked after children in Wales has reduced. Data from 2014/15 showed a 2.2 per cent decrease in the number of looked after children in 2014/15 compared to the previous year. I want to see this downward trend continue. This is a key priority for me and I am reconvening the Improving Outcomes for Children Strategic Group to continue its work and advise on how best we deliver a national approach for looked after children.

12. Taking forward early intervention and preventative actions will be a priority for the Group so that we can bring down the numbers of children taken into care, while at the same time, contributing to reducing the incidences of adverse childhood experiences.

13. The Group's work programme will be based around three key themes:

- Preventing children entering care and early intervention
- Improving outcomes for children already in care
- Supporting care leavers to successful futures and independent living

Mitigate the effects of welfare reform

14. The programme of welfare reform being implemented by the UK Government will have an adverse impact on families across Wales. Research by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) shows the tax and benefit reforms to be implemented over the next few years will reduce household incomes in Wales by around £600 million a year. Households are estimated to lose 1.6 per cent of their net income on average or around £460 a year. This loss will add to the significant amount of income already lost as a result of earlier welfare cuts. The IFS research also shows lower-income households, particularly those with children, will be disproportionately hit. For example, poor working-age households with children lose around 12 per cent of net income on average. Large families lose a huge amount (£7,750 a year or 20 per cent of net income on average) in the long run from the restriction of the child element in tax credits and Universal Credit to two children. We must recognise that this is a non-devolved matter. However I am committed to seeking innovative solutions within our control that will help mitigate the adverse impacts for these families.

15. The Households Below Average Income (HBAI) statistics were published on Tuesday 28 June. The HBAI data provides the latest poverty data for Wales and for the whole of the UK, for the three year period 2012/13 to 2014/15 and told us that 23 per cent of people in Wales live in households in relative income poverty. This has not changed since last year. It also told us that 29 per cent of children live in households in relative income poverty which is down from 31 per cent last year. Although I welcome this decrease as it suggests we are moving in the right direction, it is still an unacceptable number of children living in adverse circumstances.

16. We also know the IFS project that relative child poverty (before housing costs) in the UK will rise from 17.1 per cent (or 2.3 million children) in 2013/14 to 25.7 per cent (or 3.6 million children) in 2020/21. This increase is partly due to the tax and benefit reforms. Projections are not provided at a Wales level due to small sample sizes. The Welsh Government remains committed to mitigating the impacts of child poverty.

Bring forward legislation to remove the defence of reasonable punishment

17. We will be bringing forward legislation to remove the defence of reasonable chastisement. We have made it clear that we will seek this on a cross-party basis. We are already undertaking a raft of measures to help support parents such as the Give It Time campaign. This highlights how offering encouragement and praising children for good behaviour is far more effective than harsh punishments when children do things wrong.
18. I am keen that parents adopt good parenting strategies and are helped to do so. We need to reinforce positive behaviour with both parents and children.

Children's rights and participation

19. I believe it is vitally important to listen to children and young people's voices, their participation is critical and our commitment to children's rights remains firmly at the centre of our approach.

**Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Children
July 2016**