

Evidence Paper to Children, Young People and Education Committee: General Scrutiny Session, Thursday 20 July 2017

The purpose of this paper is to update the Committee on a number of areas within the Communities and Children's portfolio, including on relevant recommendations made by the Committee during the Fifth Assembly. These are set out below.

In terms of context, my aim for the portfolio is to create safe, cohesive and resilient communities where people can live, work and bring up their children with confidence in their future. We are taking a fresh approach to tackling deprivation by focusing on the root causes of poverty, intervening at an early stage to enable children to lay the basis for lifelong health and prosperity. We will also help increase prosperity by tackling obstacles to employability and sustained employment while improving access to secure, efficient and affordable homes.

The Welsh Government's Response to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's Concluding Observations

At the hearing in Geneva last year, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child took note of Wales' progress, for example with the Together for Children and Young People programme in improving mental health, and efforts on coordinating a better response to child sexual exploitation, and also praised how the right to play is promoted. No formal response has been made to the Committee to date and this is for the UK Government to lead on, as the State Party. However, I issued a press release immediately following the publication of the Concluding Observations and intend to issue a Written Statement on 12 July, highlighting Wales' progress against the recommendations in this first year. Meanwhile, officials meet regularly with colleagues in Northern Ireland, Scotland and England to discuss children's rights and taking forward the 2016 recommendations. Internally, we share the recommendations across government to ensure we keep abreast of developments with each of the recommendations. We also continue to engage with key children's rights stakeholders through the Children's Rights Advisory Group, to develop a plan of action to take forward the Concluding Observations.

For those areas where powers are devolved, progress has already been made. Reinforcing this Government's commitment to positive parenting and to children's rights, we are committed to taking forward legislation that will remove the defence of reasonable chastisement. Last October, the Assembly Commission announced plans to establish a Welsh Youth Parliament and is currently consulting on this. We are also investing in quality childcare as we know this supports families with employment choices. We know that enabling parents to access employment improves families' prospects and reduces poverty. Side by side, we will work with the sector to ensure quality provision which is sustainable and provides children with the best start in life. We continue to work with the UK Government to ensure that the needs and outcomes of children, young people and families in Wales are considered.

The Child Poverty Strategy

We are taking a whole government approach to prosperity for all, where it is no longer the sole responsibility of any single Minister. The Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Infrastructure has overall responsibility for the coordination of cross-cutting measures to promote economic opportunity and individual Cabinet Secretaries lead in their respective portfolio areas. Tackling child poverty is a vital element of the Communities and Children's portfolio.

Our 2015 child Poverty Strategy sets out five strategic objectives which are:

1. To reduce the number of families living in workless households, as children living in workless households are particularly at risk of living in poverty.
2. To increase the skills of parents and young people living in low-income households so they can secure well-paid employment and in-work progression, as in-work poverty is a growing issue.
3. To reduce the inequalities which exist in the health, education and economic outcomes of children and families by improving the outcomes of the poorest. Preventing poverty is fundamental to our long term vision for supporting low income households.
4. To use all available levers to create a strong economy and labour market, which supports the tackling poverty agenda and reduces in-work poverty in Wales.
5. To support families living in poverty to increase household income through debt and financial advice, action to address the "poverty premium" (where households pay disproportionately more for goods and services) and action to mitigate the impacts of welfare reform.

The objectives are based on what the evidence tells us around where we can have most impact, in terms of improving outcomes for low income families. They also reflect the policy levers available to the Welsh Government. The strategy also identifies five key priority areas where we can do more with the levers available to the Welsh Government to improve outcomes for low income households in the here and now. These areas are childcare, housing and regeneration, mitigating the impacts of welfare reform, in-work poverty and food poverty.

Ambition to Eradicate Child Poverty

Last December, we recognised that Welsh Government would not be able to deliver its ambition to eradicate child poverty by 2020. This ambition depended heavily on the actions of the UK Government and wider UK economic circumstances.

The fiscal powers over the welfare system which are needed to bring about any significant change in levels of child poverty, do not sit with Welsh Government, so we need to focus on what we can achieve with the levers we have available. However, our ambition to eradicate child poverty is not in doubt and our 2010 Children and Families (Wales) Measure will continue to provide the legislative framework for tackling child poverty in Wales. As you are aware, this places a duty on Welsh Ministers and named public bodies to set objectives for tackling child poverty.

Both Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and child poverty can have an impact on outcomes for children, but they are not the same thing. Sometimes ACEs, such as parental conflict and separation, poor mental health and substance misuse, can have an impact on levels of poverty. Dealing with ACEs is therefore a fundamental strand of our approach to tackling child poverty and building the resilience of children and young people. Work on ACEs will be taken forward alongside actions which support the delivery of the objectives of the Child Poverty Strategy. However, ACEs are not limited to those living in poverty, which is why programmes such as Families First are so important, with their universal availability. Early intervention and promoting positive parenting are key to tackling neglect. Our programmes such as Flying Start and Families First, together with our Parenting: Give it Time campaign, are aimed at providing parents with the tools to give their children the best start in life.

The New Approach to Building Resilient Communities

We recognise the many individual success stories attributed to Communities First but it has not had an impact on overall poverty levels in Wales, which remain stubbornly high. Change is difficult but we must take the tough decisions to deliver a new approach which deals with the root causes of poverty and which is not limited by postcode.

We are taking a whole-government approach to building resilient communities. This is focusing on the three key areas of early years, employment and empowerment: developing communities that can offer children the best start in life; communities that are ready and able to work; and communities that are empowered and engaged, as well as being safe and strong.

Prosperity brings security to individuals, families and communities. Resilient communities need to be underpinned by good quality local employment, connected infrastructure and skills for work. Communities for Work and Lift are key employability support programmes targeting our most deprived communities. PaCE complements this by delivering its services to parents across the rest of Wales. To date the Communities for Work, PaCE and Lift programmes across Wales have supported over 11,000 individuals with over 3,500 entering employment, ahead of their targets.

The Work of the Ministerial Advisory Group on Improving Outcomes for Looked After Children

I established the Improving Outcomes for Children Ministerial Advisory Group to improve outcomes for looked after children and identify what early and preventative action could be taken to support families and children at the edge of care. The work of the Ministerial Advisory Group is underpinned by three themes, these are:

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

The Group is taking forward a number of work strands as part of their wide-reaching work programme covering research, developments and improvements to professional practice.

£1 million St. David's Day Fund

I recently announced a recurrent £1 million St David's Day Fund to help support young people aged 16-25, who are or have been in local authority care, access opportunities that lead them towards independent and successful lives.

The fund is to be administered flexibly and creatively by local authorities, to meet the needs of their young people in the same way that birth parents support their children including the 'bank of mum and dad' role. This could mean providing financial support for setting up home, equipment for education, training or employment, paying for transport, activities which help to remove social isolation and so on.

£8 million Budget Consequential for Looked After Children

In May, I announced around £8 million of new money from the UK Budget social care consequential which further support looked after children and accelerate the continuing work programme of the Ministerial Advisory Group. It has been allocated to:

- Expand Edge of Care Services (£5 million)
- Expand the Reflect project across Wales (£850,000)
- Support Care Leavers by:
 - (i) extending the provision of personal advisers up to age 25 (£1 million); and
 - (ii) supporting local authorities in their provision of work placements/traineeships for young people in their care (£625,000)
- (iii) Implement the National Fostering Framework (£400,000)

A three year change programme is also being developed to maximise the benefits from the UK Budget social care consequential and help deliver our shared vision for looked after children and care leavers in Wales.

The Development of the Childcare Offer for Wales

Development of the Childcare Offer for Wales is progressing well, with early implementation in seven local authorities from September. Gwynedd and Anglesey are working on a joint scheme, and the remaining five authorities are Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Flintshire, Rhondda Cynon Taff and Swansea

The offer will provide 30 hours of combined early education and childcare for three and four year olds whose parents are eligible. For the purposes of early implementation, a 'working parent' refers to parents and guardians who are working and earn, on average, a weekly minimum amount equivalent to 16 hours at national minimum wage (NMW) or national living wage (NLW). Both parents in a two parent family, or the sole parent in a lone parent family, will need to meet this requirement. Our definition of 'working' includes those who are employed or self-employed, and parents on zero hour contracts, where they can demonstrate they meet the minimum

earnings over a three month period. Detailed guidance for the seven early implementer local authorities was published on our website on 12 June.

I can confirm that any childcare provider who is registered with and inspected by the Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales, or OFSTED in England, will be able to deliver the childcare element of the offer from September. Whilst the parent and child must live within one of the specified areas within the seven early implementer authorities, the childcare element of the offer can be delivered by any registered childcare setting, regardless of location. I have also confirmed providers will receive £4.50 per hour for the childcare provision under the offer. This will be a single funding rate across all seven early implementer local authorities, ensuring clarity and consistency of the childcare offer for every parent and provider.

We expect the offer to be available to around 5,000 children in this first year of early implementation, and all seven authorities open for applications from qualifying parents in June 2017. Blaenau Gwent will be testing the offer across the whole authority, with testing happening in specific locations across the other six.

Learning from these early implementers will be important in helping us fine-tune policies and systems prior to a wider roll-out. We will therefore be undertaking rigorous monitoring and evaluation of the early implementation of the childcare offer across all seven early implementer local authorities. A contract for independent evaluation is currently out to tender and will be awarded in July.

As well as working with our early implementers to begin delivering the offer, we are working on the arrangements for full roll out. The First Minister confirmed I will bring forward a Bill in relation to the offer next year. This Bill will be concerned with the application, eligibility checking and payment processes, ensuring the relevant data collection processing and protection systems are in place.

Updates to Recommendations Made by the Committee During the Fifth Assembly

In respect of the recommendations from the Committee's report into Statutory Advocacy Provision (published in February 2016), a Local Government Technical Group was established (led by ADSS Cymru and the WLGA) to develop an Implementation Plan to progress this work, looking at how best local authorities and regions could be supported and to identify the actions required in order to achieve a national approach. Here, the Welsh Government is funding an Implementation Manager to work with each of the regions.

At a meeting of the Strategic Leadership Group (SLG) on 13 June the WLGA and ADSS Cymru presented the significant progress that has been made by local authorities over recent months. All six regions have now fully committed to implement the National Approach in full and have arrangements in place to enable this. The Welsh Government agreed to provide up to £550,000 to the regions through a regional grant for years 2017/18 and 2018/19 and all regions have received their grant letters.

The approach includes the National Independent Advocacy Standards and Outcomes Framework (NSOF). The Welsh Government has consulted with stakeholders on the outcome statement contained in the NSOF and developed the final draft of the Framework. The Framework will now be updated to reflect the responses. The Strategic Leadership Group agreed to review progress on the national approach in the autumn.