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## INTRODUCTION

1. The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) represents the 22 local authorities in Wales. The three fire and rescue authorities and the three national park authorities are associate members.
2. It seeks to provide representation to local authorities within a dynamic and developing policy framework that satisfies the key priorities of its members and delivers a broad range of services that add value to Welsh Local Government and the communities it serves.
3. The WLGA is guided by a number of key principles which underpin the work of the Association and have helped to shape this response to the Children, Young People and Education Committee's consultation on the inquiry into *Targeted Funding to Improve Educational Outcomes*.
4. The WLGA believes that the delivery of public services should be set in a foundation of good governance with appropriate mechanisms for audit, scrutiny and accountability. It is also the WLGA's belief that local services should be provided within a democratic framework of local accountability where decisions about services should be taken as close point of delivery as possible and that the people and communities using those services should be as engaged as possible in their delivery.
5. The WLGA recognises that it is the role of the Welsh Government to set the strategic framework and policy direction for services at a national level and that it is the role of local government to deliver those services taking account of the local circumstances and pressures. It is also recognised that services must be provided within a proportionate but effective regulatory framework to ensure that public resources are used appropriately and that services are delivered effectively and efficiently.
6. Taken, these principles provide assurance to the public that the appropriate structures and processes are in place to ensure that resources are used as effectively and as efficiently as possible in the provision of public services and that the public can hold these bodies to account, to ensure that they are doing what should be doing.
7. The WLGA has consistently argued for an un-hypothecated Revenue Support Grant (RSG) as the best way of funding local government and any new responsibilities or additional burdens placed on local government should be fully costed and appropriately funded.

8. The WLGA recognises that some policy initiatives or strategies need to have funding attached to them for specific periods of time to make sure that they become embedded and are delivered as intended. For this reason, the WLGA, by exception, supports the use of specific grants on the understanding that funding will eventually transfer in to the RSG.

### **Targeted Funding to Improve Educational Outcomes**

9. The WLGA is pleased to be able to respond to the Children, Young People and Education Committee's consultation on the inquiry into *Targeted Funding to Improve Educational Outcomes*. Local government in Wales has consistently emphasised in recent years that education is a top priority for authorities and that focused all their efforts within education are focused on raising standards and improving outcomes for learners. Education is corporate responsibility and, in that sense, everything that councils do in relation to children, young people and education contributes towards school improvement and educational outcomes.
10. There is continuing concern within authorities and over the plethora of new grants being issued by the Welsh Government - the small rural schools grant, funding for school bursars, infant class size etc. There is limited capacity within local authorities and schools to develop bids often within limited time scales in addition to the industry involved with monitoring and auditing the use of grants and assessing their impact.
11. At an operational level, grant funding for initiatives is seen as reducing the available core funding for schools. Many schools across Wales have deficits and most schools are going to find it increasingly difficult to balance their budgets in future years. The use of grant funding for areas which are integral to the day to day functioning of schools such as the Foundation Phase is difficult to understand.
12. These are challenging times for the public sector in Wales. The 22 councils in Wales have experienced 8 consecutive years of budget cuts and the continuing uncertainty of what local government reform means. There is the uncertainty also around the UK's departure from the European Union and the impact of the wider process of globalisation and technological change on Wales and its communities. As such, it is more important than ever that resources are used as effectively and as efficiently as possible in the provision of services. It is important also that processes are streamlined and lean, reducing bureaucracy and complexity where possible but continuing to provide assurance in terms of scrutiny, accountability and standards.

### **Pupil Deprivation Grant (PDG)**

13. These pressures come to bear on the Welsh Government as well as local government and the WLGA supports fully the policy intentions behind the PDG in the current economic climate. The purpose of the PDG is stated as:

*“to improve outcomes for learners eligible for free school meals (eFSM) and Looked After Children (LAC). It is intended to overcome the additional barriers that prevent learners from disadvantaged backgrounds achieving their full potential.”*

14. The WLGA supports this approach as it recognises the adverse impact that poverty and deprivation having on educational outcomes. There is a wealth of literature and research evidence that highlights the link between poverty and low educational attainment. Household income is widely recognised as the biggest determinant of educational outcomes and the PDG is focused on mitigating against the impact of low income levels. The use of eFSM as a proxy for poverty is contestable but again it is supported by the WLGA as the best mechanism available for targeting resources. As the number of children eligible for Free School Meals increases within a school, the average attainment of pupils within the school decreases.

## **Evidence and Evaluation**

15. Assessing the impact of those targeted resources is more problematic as it is difficult to establish a causal relationship between any educational intervention and outcomes. This is especially difficult in the short term. Evaluation of any such initiatives is essential from the outset therefore and inquiries such as this are important as they add to the body of knowledge available and the potential for learning from experience and identifying and promoting good practice. The Welsh Government sets out detailed monitoring arrangements for schools in relation to PDG in their Guidance Documentation on using PDG and the Welsh Government has published numerous other documents on how to use the funding effectively. Estyn also provides advice on using targeted funding in deprived areas to improve outcomes, The Sutton Trust Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) Toolkit provides information on a variety of interventions that can be used to help disadvantaged children achieve their potential and there are other sources of informed learning. There is however a balance to be struck between useful evaluation evidence gathering and excessive monitoring and prescription that impedes delivery.
16. The WLGA itself does not hold or collect information about individual pupil or school experiences of the PDG but has consulted all 22 authorities for their views and experiences. There is no doubt that schools value the additional resources provided by the PDG in the current financial climate of continuing austerity but it is far more difficult to assess fully and effectively the impact of the funding. The same applies to other funding arrangements within the scope of this inquiry such as Schools Challenge Cymru and elements of the EIG. As is mentioned above, it is impossible to establish a causal relationship between interventions and specific outcomes and the WLGA has therefore always advocated a whole system approach and a holistic strategy to addressing the impact of poverty on attainment. Such strategies need to

be part of a whole authority approach to school improvement and raising standards and a fully integrated part of service delivery and financial planning.

17. There also a needs to be a more coherent connection between wider partnership funding, for example Families First, Employability Grant, CF Legacy along with PDG funding. The current fracturing of these funding streams militates against a more cohesive locality based approach. There is a growing view within local government that a bespoke locality focused strategy informed by real-time data and intelligence is the most effective way of reducing the impact of deprivation or on learning and aspiration.
18. Research evidence suggests quite clearly that an integrated approach to interventions is more likely to be successful overall because different approaches will work in different settings but what will work where is not clear at the outset. Similarly, an integrated approach is more likely to highlight synergies and prevent conflict between interventions.

### **Schools Challenge Cymru**

19. There is evidence that the implementation of the *Schools Challenge Cymru* (SCC) initiative highlighted the potential conflict of separate but parallel interventions targeted at improving outcomes. The SCC programme was not fully integrated with the wider school improvement work of local authorities at the outset and many cases came into conflict with rather than enhanced other interventions. SCC was based on similar interventions in London and Greater Manchester and attempted to build on their successes. SCC embraced a wide range of interventions at school level to mixed success. The formal evaluation work commissioned by the Welsh Government highlights a picture of mixed success and reflects the same problems identified with other similar programmes. Short term programmes of around 3 years are impossible to evaluate effectively and they must be part of a wider integrated approach. The evidence of the impact of SCC on educational outcomes is at best inconclusive. This echoes the evidence and experiences of the RAISE programme (Raising Attainment and Individual Standards of Education) introduced by the Welsh Government in 2006. The WLGA supported the broad aims of RAISE but was critical of the planning and funding of the programme as a stand-alone intervention rather than part of an integrated approach to school improvement.
20. The Association has given evidence to various National Assembly Committees on its concerns over the number and value of specific grants in education and children's services and these arguments are well rehearsed. More recently, the WLGA gave evidence to the Children, Young People and Education Committee's inquiry on the Education Improvement Grant in 2016 and commented specifically on the Minority Ethnic Achievement and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller elements within that grant.

21. The WLGA welcomed the creation of the EIG as step towards reducing the number of specific grants in education and as an interim arrangement before the funding was transferred into the revenue settlement. The view taken was that the Foundation Phase was sufficiently embedded for the funding to go into the RSG but there were concerns over the inclusion of funding for minority ethnic achievement and Gypsy, Roma and traveller children (£8m combined) within this grant. The fear was that any future cuts would fall disproportionately on these smaller elements because of the restrictive terms and conditions attached to the grant to deliver Foundation Phase commitments. The WLGA argued that the best way of safeguarding funding for these groups was to transfer the entirety of the EIG into the RSG.
22. The WLGA has argued elsewhere that if the statutory responsibility remains within local government then all funding should be channelled through individual authorities. There is still ambiguity over funding that goes directly to the regional school improvement consortia rather than via constituent authorities and while it is not within the specific focus of this inquiry it is a relevant cause for concern.

## Conclusions

23. In conclusion, the WLGA welcomes this inquiry into the impact of targeted funding on educational outcomes and supports the Welsh Government focus on mitigating against the impact of poverty and deprivation on educational outcomes. The Association believes however that there must be greater focus on earlier intervention and exposing very young learners to high quality teaching, high quality support (within and outside school) and high-quality leadership (including high quality community leadership). This can only happen within a more integrated and strategic approach to education funding and intervention and a move away from specific grants and short term tightly focused interventions.
24. There is considerable research work and evaluation evidence that supports this conclusion but it is not evident that this work is utilised effectively and informs policy making. There needs to be a greater focus on learning lessons from previous initiatives and programmes.
25. While the evidence to support short term school interventions is mixed and often inconclusive, interventions and initiatives such as the PDG and SCC are not without their merits. There is no doubt that some aspects of this additional funding are welcomed by individual schools, especially in the current period of austerity, but the WLGA believes that in this financial context, funding should be incorporated into the RSG and that planned interventions should be part of a holistic strategy and a whole-system approach to school improvement, rising standards and improving outcomes for all learners.