

6th November 2019

Nick Ramsay AM
Chair, Public Accounts Committee

Dear Nick,

Re: Care Experienced Children and Young People

Thank you for your letter of 21st October requesting an update from the Ministerial Advisory Group with regards to the progress made against the identified work streams.

To improve accountability and opportunities for scrutiny, the Improving Outcomes for Children's website has just been launched which details the role of the Ministerial Advisory Group and the work of the Improving Outcomes for Children programme. The Annual Report will be published on the website in November. The Ministerial Advisory Group has worked closely with Welsh Government in advising on Phase 3 of the Improving Outcomes for Children programme (2018-21). The Group continues to provide advice and direction to the Improving Outcomes for Children work programme so that it maintains its focus and continues to progress at pace the three key areas for action.

WORKSTREAM 1 – SAFELY REDUCING THE NUMBERS OF CHILDREN IN NEED OF CARE

Strand 1 - Supporting local, regional and national approaches to reducing safely the need for care.

1. Members of our Group undertook an Appreciative Inquiry in six local authorities to help identify effective approaches to family support and strategies for managing risk, including edge of care services. The findings from the Inquiry and subsequent recommendations have been useful in determining how Welsh Government invests in strengthening support for vulnerable families in the community, including services that assist family reunification and exit from care. To help reduce the need for care and more intensive therapeutic services, Welsh Government has invested £15 million over two years via the Integrated Care Fund. Regional Partnership Boards (RPBs) are publishing their plans for making best use of this grant, including additional capacity for family conferences and reunification of children with birth families. The Reflect project has been rolled out across Wales to reduce the number of children being taken into care by breaking the cycle of repeat pregnancies and recurrent care proceedings.

Strand 2 - Strengthen arrangements for Kinship Carers and Special Guardianship Order

2. The arrangements for supporting kinship carers have been strengthened through co-production of a kinship care guide. The Ministerial Advisory Group has supported this development and the work being done by AFA Cymru to develop a national framework for special guardianship support services.

Strand 3 - Undertake research identifying the number of children who have parents with a learning disability and who no longer live at home and the reasons behind this changed status.

3. As part of the Improving Outcomes for Children programme, Welsh Government commissioned the Institute of Public Care (IPC) to carry out pioneering research to: establish the extent to which parents with a learning disability in Wales are involved with Children's Social Services; understand the factors driving patterns of involvement; determine practice changes needed to support an improvement agenda in this area of public services. Research findings are due to be published in December 2019.

Strand 4 - Identifying approaches which help to avoid use of court proceedings, encourage the use of measures rather than care orders and promote consistent judicial practice.

4. Welsh Government is working in a number of ways to explore how we can support a whole system approach to reducing the numbers of children entering care. The Family Justice Network and Local Family Justice Boards have key roles in taking forward work with partners including the judiciary, local authorities, Cafcass Cymru and others to explore ways to address the variation between local authorities in terms of the numbers of children in care, how to improve consistency in working practices and share best practice. This work complements the Ministry of Justice's Targeted Family Justice Review.

WORKSTREAM 2 – HAVING SUFFICIENT HIGH-QUALITY PLACEMENTS FOR CHILDREN WHO ARE LOOKED AFTER

Strand 1 Enabling local authorities to source suitable and timely placements for the children and young people they look after, ensuring that more of them can be placed closer to home.

5. Welsh Government is developing a national strategic approach to the commissioning of placements for looked after children in order to improve sufficiency, choice and quality of placements through better commissioning and regional working. The Ministerial Advisory Group has helped to define the priority areas to be tackled and it will continue to be actively involved. The National Commissioning Board and RPBs have been asked to focus on children's services, including placements for children who are looked after.

Strand 2 Helping local and central government to work on national, regional and local initiatives that will improve placement choice and quality.

Fostering

6. The National Fostering Framework has developed a strategy for local authority fostering services. There have been considerable efforts to improve:

- the number of enquiries to foster that become approved carers (this includes moves towards a regional approach for dealing with initial enquiries);
- the quality of the service that applicants receive throughout the foster care assessment process;
- the learning and development opportunities for approved foster carers (with introduction of a national learning and development framework scheduled for November); and
- the 'overall 'offer' foster carers receive by being a local authority foster carer (including reductions in Council Tax; online access to the foster care handbook and to foster care payslips; free town centre parking; free access to leisure facilities for the whole foster family).

Adoption

7. Welsh Government has provided local authorities with £2.3 million funding in 2019/20 to help strengthen adoption provision to prevent children re-entering care and to reduce the time they spend waiting to exit care through adoption. The Regional Collaboratives are working with voluntary adoption agency partners on specialist adopter recruitment schemes to meet the placement needs of sibling groups, older children and children with additional complex needs. A new Adoption Register has been launched.

Residential Care

8. Reporting to the Ministerial Advisory Group, a Task and Finish Group has been meeting to oversee the work programme needed to deal with a wide range of issues. It commissioned research to increase understanding about the characteristics of Welsh children and young people placed in residential settings. Wales Data Cymru was commissioned to build a profile of children's residential care across local authority and private sector provision. Most regions have sufficient residential care capacity but some of the largest local authorities in Wales do find this a challenge. There was also concern about the lack of emergency or crisis provision, including remand. Regions are being asked to consider commissioning together so that these shortfalls are addressed. RPBs can bid for capital and revenue funding from the Integrated Care Fund to support these developments.

WORKSTREAM 3 – SUPPORTING CHILDREN WHO ARE LOOKED AFTER TO HAVE THE BEST POSSIBLE JOURNEYS THROUGH CARE AND INTO ADULTHOOD

Strand 1 Strengthening corporate parenting responsibilities across public services.

9. A Corporate Parenting Task and Finish Group has been re-established to consider what corporate parenting means for other public sector organisations in Wales. It is looking at recent developments in local authorities which are intent on improving the 'offer' or 'pledge' which they make to care experienced children and young people. The new offer can cover areas such as advice and assistance; well-being; learning, training and employment; safeguarding from harm; growing up; having a say and inclusion. Voices From Care Cymru has been working to benchmark good practice in corporate parenting and to explore whether young people can develop a kite mark to quality assure the corporate parenting strategies adopted by a local authority. Officials have been holding conversations with lawyers to identify legislative options for extending duties across public services using the existing legislative powers available.

Strand 2 Raising the educational attainment, skills and ambition of care experienced children and young people

10. This year, the Welsh Government has been working with key partners to co-produce a strategic plan to improve the educational attainment and experience of looked after children. The Ministerial Advisory Group is working to ensure that future programme development is based on a clear model that sets out an explicit theory of change, taking into account the range of risk and protective factors associated with child development. The Fostering Wellbeing (social pedagogy) approach, which focuses on the education and the upbringing of children in a foster care environment, has been piloted in one local authority and it is being rolled out on a phased basis.

Strand 3 Tackling emotional and mental health issues that may affect care experienced children

11. The Welsh Government has made significant investment to improve mental health services for children and young people. This includes £15m new investment for RPBs which can be used to develop therapeutic support services. Work is being done to ensure that the statutory health assessments for looked after children properly cover emotional and mental health. On behalf of our Group, NSPCC and Voices From Care Cymru published *Listen. Act. Thrive*, a report based on consultation with care experienced young people about support for their emotional and mental health.

Strand 4 Providing appropriate support and guidance to a young person early in their journey towards independence and helping to maximise life chances.

12. £625,000 has been allocated to local authorities so that they can establish/enhance schemes which operate on the basis that care leavers should be seen as part of the 'family business' and offered training and job opportunities within the council's own workforce. To support them with making the transition, entitlement to a personal adviser has been extended to those aged 21-25, at a cost of £1 million p.a. Since April 2016, young people in Wales have the right to stay with their foster families beyond the age of 18 under the *When I am Ready* scheme. Welsh Government is looking at the viability of extending the scheme to young people in residential care. It has also worked with local authorities to exempt care leavers from paying Council Tax; this became law from April 2019.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David Melding". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping tail on the final letter.

David Melding AM

Chair, Ministerial Advisory Group on Care Experienced Children and Young People