

Children and Young People Committee

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Evidence from Deputy Minister for Children and Social Services

Priorities for Children and Young People

Introduction

As the newly appointed Deputy Minister for Children and Social Services I am delighted that I will take the lead on delivering our manifesto commitments for children and families. We have reaffirmed our commitment to support children and families and to tackle child poverty. Our overall objectives are to help families into work, improve skills and narrow the gaps in outcomes for children living in poverty.

I am particularly pleased that my portfolio now covers the breadth of issues in relation to children. It provides an opportunity to develop a comprehensive and seamless system of support for vulnerable children and those disadvantaged through poverty.

As you are all very much aware improving the lives of children and young people, especially those living in poverty and those that are most vulnerable, is a responsibility we all share. Improving the outcomes for children, young people and families is the priority and can only be achieved through policies that are co-ordinated, proactive and focussed on improving children's wellbeing. The Children and Young People's Committee will have a crucial role to play in that process, and I am pleased to be able to make an early appearance before the Committee to discuss my priorities.

Underpinning all of our work to support children and young people will be our commitment to the UNCRC and the continuing use of the seven core aims as the basis for our development of policies and programmes to support children and young people.

Purpose

This paper provides the Committee with an overview of my key priorities for children, young people and families in Wales. Over the coming months I will be setting out more detail how we will take forward a coherent programme to deliver against the priorities, and how we intend to manage this across Government.

Child Poverty

Earlier this year we published our Child Poverty Strategy. This Strategy gives a clear account of what the Welsh Government can achieve in helping to reduce child poverty – and improve the outcomes of low income families.

It sets out three strategic objectives for tackling child poverty, which are: to reduce worklessness; to increase the skills of young people and parents and to tackle the inequalities that exist in the education, health and economic outcomes of families living in poverty.

We are working with departments across the Welsh Government to set out the action required to deliver these three objectives with the intention of producing an anti-poverty action plan outlining the distinctive approach we are taking in Wales.

Supporting Children and Families

We are committed to supporting children and families and protecting the rights of children. We also want to support positive parenting and to provide parents with the support they need. We will work to make physical punishment of children and young people unacceptable through the promotion of positive alternatives and our support through parenting programmes.

To ensure our investment in children makes a real difference we will continue to improve the transparency of budgeting for children and young people at Welsh Government level.

We also want to ensure that children and young people have a voice and that they participate in things that affect them. I want to see children contributing to the important debate around services that affect them and we will continue to improve opportunities for all children and young people in Wales to participate in decision making on issues which affect them. I also want children to be seen as an important part of our society and will therefore continue to promote positive images of young people wherever possible to counteract negative portrayals in the media and elsewhere.

Families First

Families First was launched in July 2010 with the announcement of two consortia (one in north Wales, one in south Wales). It is closely aligned to support the Child Poverty Strategy, particularly the objective to reduce inequalities that exist in outcomes (health, education, economic) for children and families living in poverty. Through Families First we are working with local authorities to develop new multi-agency approaches to supporting families living in poverty, with a clear emphasis on prevention and early intervention. In this way we aim to reduce the number of families developing more complex needs, requiring more costly and intensive interventions later.

We are committed to maintaining the Families First programme throughout the life of the current Assembly. Recognising that families with disabled children often need additional support, there is an additional commitment to maintain a focus on support for these families.

My current priorities are:

1. to continue to embed Families First in the initial two consortia, and draw out emerging lessons from implementation;
2. to ensure that Families First is successfully introduced into the three new consortia (announced March 2011);
3. to issue Families First Guidance to all local authorities in Wales in summer 2011, in time for the full roll out of Families First across Wales from April 2012; and
4. to embed the learning from Families First into the development of systems change across the range of services that support children and families.

Flying Start

Flying Start is the Welsh Government's flagship early years programme and provides a path towards improving the life chances of children in our most disadvantaged communities. It provides a "universal" set of entitlements which all children and their families within designated deprived areas can access without associated means testing or stigma. International evidence is that intensive intervention in the early years can make a real difference to outcomes, if the detail of delivery is right.

We have given a clear commitment that we want to see more children and families accessing the support available through Flying Start. We will:

- Double the number of children benefitting from improved health visiting, free nursery places and better support to families through our "Flying Start" programme; and
- Extend the reach of the programme and in the next Assembly term double the number of those gaining from Flying Start to 36,000 so that almost a quarter of all children in Wales aged 0-3 will be able to benefit. *(Currently, Flying Start benefits approximately 18,000 young people at a cost of about £38 million annually.)*

My officials are currently exploring the options to deliver on these commitments.

Childcare

Childcare is fundamental to helping parents balance work and family life and is a key element of the Child Poverty Strategy. The Policy Statement for Childcare: Nurturing Children, Supporting Families published in February this year sets out our priorities of high quality, accessible and affordable childcare.

Children are our principal consumers and beneficiaries. Our vision is for families to have access to the high quality childcare they need at a price they can afford, but we recognise that there are significant challenges ahead. The Childcare Policy Statement set's out the Welsh Government's immediate priorities for childcare in Wales and for longer term ambitions to secure continued improvements.

Play

We will continue to improve opportunities for all children and young people to play in safety and, in particular, we will support improved access to play for children with disabilities.

As a Government we remain firmly committed to the promotion of play for children and young people. We have been the first Government in the UK to develop legislation on play.

The Children and Families (Wales) Measure, section 11, Play Opportunities, allows Welsh Ministers to place a duty on Local Authorities to assess for and with regard to that assessment, secure sufficient play opportunities for children in their areas as far as reasonably practicable.

This duty has not yet been commenced. However, as set out in the response to recommendation 1 of the Children and Young People Committee Inquiry into the Provision of Safe Places to Play and Hang Out, much preparatory work has been undertaken in regard to the play sufficiency duty and I would hope to be able to announce in due course our plans for implementation of the duty on play.

Implementation of the Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011

The 'Rights of Children and Young Person's (Wales) Measure', places a duty on Welsh Ministers to pay due regard to the UNCRC (which includes all 47 rights and optional protocols) when exercising their functions. The Measure will come into force in two stages – it applies to policy and legislation from May 2012 and all functions from May 2014

The measure received unanimous cross party and received 'Royal Approval' on 17th March, and came into force on 17 May 2011.

Implementation of the measure is now the new focus of activity and my officials are currently working through each aspect of the stated provisions of the legislation.

Work is already underway on implementing the manifesto commitments of:

- Ensure that the 'Rights Measure' is given full effect in government policies and programmes throughout policies and programmes throughout the course of the next Assembly.
- Take a lead role in preparing for the next periodic review of the UK's compliance with the UNCRC.
- Work with the Children's Commissioner for Wales, children's organisations and the third sector to promote wider understanding and appreciation of rights-based policy making and service delivery.

Children's Social Services

I met with the Health and Social Services Committee yesterday and outlined my priorities for social services in Wales including those that concern children. I thought however that this Committee would like to see the whole of my priorities.

“Sustainable Social Services for Wales: A Framework for Action” was published in February this year. It outlined our values, vision and key priorities for supporting people in Wales. In respect of children, Welsh Government has made it clear that it believes that children’s best interests are served when they are cared for in their family wherever possible.

My priority for children’s social services is to deliver the vision set out in *A Framework for Action*, and in our manifesto. We will use a variety of means to achieve this but our key delivery mechanism will be through the creation of a coherent legal framework for social services. We have already announced that we will bring forward proposals for a Social Services Act for Wales and I expect the Act to include measures for example that will:

- Strengthen safeguarding and child protection arrangements in Wales, including through a review of current law, the setting up of a new National Board and implementation of the outcome of the review of local safeguarding children’s boards
- Provide for consistency of standards and greater stability for those children and young people who need to be looked after including through the introduction of a national looked after children’s service to ensure that an adequate placement choice is made available and that services operate to common standards and are accountable.
- Empower and strengthen children and young people’s voice and control
- Facilitate improved outcomes through integration, strengthening & simplification of the assessment and care planning arrangements, putting the emphasis on professionals not processes.

I intend to consult on the establishment of a single, national adoption agency for Wales.

I also intend to prioritise the further roll-out of Integrated Family Support Services, our flagship policy which requires the delivery of integrated support to children and complex families through protective, preventative and remedial services.

In 2010, I jointly commissioned with Ministry of Justice and Department of Education an independent review of the Family Justice System in England and Wales. The FJR Panel are considering the way local authorities and other non-devolved agencies are engaged with the court process for both public and family law proceedings. I expect to receive their final report in the autumn and will consider the implementation of the outcome of the Family justice Review in the context of needs of children and families in Wales. Our manifesto has already made it clear, however, that we will want to preserve the

principle of separate representation for children in relevant family proceedings in Wales.

In our manifesto we made reference to two Bills. I have referred to the potential content of the Social Services Bill in the above, and I cover the Children's Bill below.

Children's Bill

The Rights of the Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011 places duties on Welsh Ministers to promote knowledge and understanding of the UNCRC and to have due regard to the UNCRC in the exercise of their functions.

If in applying the due regard duty we find there is a need for legislative changes to give better effect to the obligations of the UNCRC then the Children's Bill would be a means to do that.

The Children's Commissioner for Wales is an independent champion of children's rights and makes representations to the Welsh Government and to others as necessary on the views of children and young people and the key issues affecting them. In taking forward a Children's Bill, we will consider how to further strengthen his independence.

Gwenda Thomas AM
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