

Save the Children response to the National Assembly for Wales' Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee inquiry into poverty in Wales

Save the Children believes that no child should be born without a chance to thrive and fulfil their potential. Through our policy work and our programme work on the ground, we offer solutions to the challenges the UK's poorest children and families face.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to Strand 1 of the Communities, Equalities and Local Government Committee's inquiry into poverty. Save the Children believes that the rights of the child must be at the heart of everything we and the government do, and that it should be recognised that poverty has a disproportional impact on children. Evidence has shown that poverty can blight a child's life prospects, but that timely action by governments and other service providers can have lasting benefits for the child and the wider community. We urge the Welsh Government to do all it can to continue to focus maximum resources and energy to tackle this issue and remind Welsh Government that in accordance with Article 3 of the UNCRC Rights of the child, Governments are required to make decisions that are in the best interests of the child. We believe that the Committee in undertaking this inquiry has an important opportunity to assess the success of the Welsh government's declared aim: to coordinate the various policies and budgets in responding to, and prioritising poverty-reduction in Wales. There are positive moves by the Welsh Government, and we acknowledge these. The creation of the Children's' Commissioner, and incorporation of the UNCRC are good examples of this prioritisation. We do however have some concerns that the Cabinet no longer includes a Deputy Minister for Communities and Tackling Poverty and that since withdrawing funding from Funky Dragon, there is no clarity as to how Welsh Government will deliver its commitment to give children and young adults a voice with regards to the policies that affect their lives, as required by the UNCRC.

I. How effectively the Tackling Poverty Action Plan, Strategic Equality Plan and other government strategies work together.

Firstly, we at Save the Children believe that whilst one in three Welsh children is living in poverty, more can be done to tackle poverty and protect children's rights. We acknowledge that the Welsh Government's Strategic Equality Plan recognises age as an attribute that should not disadvantage an individual. We refer to the situation that is unique to young people. A 'child and young person growing up in poverty is more likely to have a life with poor health outcomes [...] low paid, unemployed, and welfare dependent'. In short it can

have a lifelong impact. The Welsh Government must continue to focus on poverty reduction for children and young people in such a way that the impact of this inequality is mitigated. We welcome the Welsh Government's progress in coordinating its three key anti-poverty programmes – Families First, Flying Start and Communities First including the creation of a common outcomes framework. Involvement in discussions regarding the fit between the proposed revised Child Poverty Strategy and other plans and strategies, have been very encouraging and it is interesting in particular for Save the Children to note the correlation between the three-yearly Child Poverty Strategy and the annual Tackling Poverty Action Plan albeit we still believe Child Poverty should have distinctive actions within the latter. For optimum effectiveness, there has to be a shared vision and understanding of how all these plans and strategies interrelate so that children and families in poverty access all the support available to improve their life chances.

Secondly, we believe it is important that application and performance of policies and strategies is carefully monitored and outcomes measured, and it is essential that best practice is shared to ensure the most impactful outcomes for all our children living in poverty in Wales. Therefore, we remain convinced that it is vital that strategic direction is provided by the Welsh Government, together with resources and guidance to assist all stakeholders to implement effectively.

2. The impacts of poverty, particularly destitution and extreme poverty, on different groups of people.

A child living in poverty suffers negative impacts on physical health, emotional well-being and cognitive development. For a child this can lead to a life lived in poverty as educational outcomes suffer. The gap between the achievements of disadvantaged compared to advantaged children is significant as early as age three. By GCSE there is a 34% gap in attainment between children living in low income households and their better off classmates. This is something that the administration must do all it can to mitigate. We would therefore like to bring to your attention that out of all the different groups in society, it is children that are the most at risk of the long term effects of poverty because of the importance of early years on lifetime development.

Another area the Welsh Governments Equality Plan should consider is the inequality of the 'poverty premium', that it costs more to be poor. It must be recognised that 'the way that low-income families purchase every day goods and services and due to their limited access to cheap financing options, they can often end up paying more'. For example, a typical annual dual fuel bill could be around 21% (£241) more expensive. Even though poverty is not one of the recognised attributes in the 'Equality Plan', this, perhaps, should be considered an equality issue, especially if one factors in the impact this has on children due to their reliance on their parents economic status, and this reliance is in turn due to their age, which is recognised by the Equality Plan.

Finally, the high cost of childcare has particular impact on those in severe poverty. This includes parents being forced to cut back on food, being forced in to debt, and parents being unable to take advantage of work and training opportunities which perpetuates the poverty trap. The Welsh Government's approach emphasises the dual function of childcare: that it

should both nurture the child and support the family. However, our research shines a light on the fact that despite this dual function, many parents in Wales, particularly those on low-incomes, are still struggling to access suitable childcare. This again can be understood as producing an unequally impacted on children as a result of their reliance due to their age. This therefore could also be considered an equality issue and must be tackled.

3. How legislation, policy and budgets targeted at tackling poverty and reducing inequality are coordinated and prioritised across the Welsh Government.

The strategies that the Welsh Government has developed such as the Building Resilient Communities and Building a Brighter Future clearly articulate the Government's commitment to mitigating the link between poverty and education. We strongly support the Welsh Government's decision to make reducing the impact of poverty on educational attainment one of its three national priorities for education in Wales. The budget allocation granted to the Pupil Deprivation Grant to enable schools to invest in those pupils eligible for Free School Meals is something we feel must continue to be given priority. Also, Communities First continues to be a flagship programme, and following its realignment, the three strategic objectives of prosperous, healthy and learning communities strengthen the link between poverty and education. We support Welsh Government's commitment 'to doubling the number of children and their families benefiting from the Flying Start programme from 18,000 to 36,000'. To this end we support and recognise the commitment that an 'additional £55 million funding has been made available over the course of the next three years'.

Further, we welcome the Welsh Government's move to keep part of the Education Maintenance Allowance and absorb the cut in Council Tax Benefit and see these as 'examples of very well targeted spending in Wales'.

As a member of the UNCRC Monitoring Group in Wales, we support the view that Welsh Government should allocate 'the maximum extent of available resources' to eliminate child poverty, with an emphasis on early intervention and prevention, and take all possible steps to increase transparency of public expenditure on child poverty reduction.

Concluding comments

We would like to thank the committee for giving us the opportunity to submit to this important inquiry. We recognise the progress and work done by the Welsh Government but would like to reiterate some key issues and thoughts.

- (1) Children suffer from the impacts of poverty disproportionately due to their age and as such could be considered an equality issue.
- (2) Strategic direction should be provided by the Welsh Government, together with resources and guidance to assist all stakeholders to implement policies effectively and in a joined-up manner.

- (3) The application and performance of policies and strategies must be carefully monitored, outcomes measured and best practice shared.
- (4) Children's views must be sought and considered with regards to policies that affect them.
- (5) Poverty still has a significant influence on the health, emotional well-being and cognitive development of children, and on current levels of education performance in Wales, potentially leading to a life of poverty.
- (6) The 'poverty premium' disproportionately affects children as well as the high cost of childcare having particular impact on children in severe poverty.
- (7) Welsh Government should allocate 'the maximum extent of available resources' to eliminate child poverty and take all possible steps to increase transparency of public expenditure on child poverty reduction.