

Mr Nick Ramsay AM
Chair of the Public Accounts Committee
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
Cardiff
CF99 1NA

24 Cathedral Road / 24 Heol y Gadeirlan
Cardiff / Caerdydd
24 Cathedral Road / 24 Heol y Gadeirlan
Cardiff / Caerdydd
CF11 9LJ
Tel / Ffôn: 029 2032 0500
Fax / Ffacs: 029 2032 0600
Textphone / Ffôn testun: 029 2032 0660
info@audit.wales / post@archwilio.cymru
www.audit.wales / www.archwilio.cymru

Reference: AC/077/caf
Date issued: 23 January 2019

Dear Nick

Welsh Government Response: Care Experienced Children and Young People

The clerking team invited my comments on the Welsh Government response to the Committee's November 2018 report on care experienced children and young people. While the Committee's inquiry did not flow from a Wales Audit Office report, colleagues have reviewed the response and I have set out a number of observations below.

In some instances, the Welsh Government has accepted the Committee's recommendation where it appears to be responding positively but not exactly as the Committee may have intended. This reflects the approach to acceptance or rejection that the Permanent Secretary has outlined to the Committee previously. Nevertheless, the Committee will need to decide whether it is satisfied with the response provided in those cases.

Recommendation 1: The Committee may wish to clarify the relationship between the arrangements for the Performance Improvement Framework for Children and the indicators that will be in place from April 2019 to provide an enhanced dataset of outcomes spanning a wider range of policy areas and which are in addition to those included in the Framework. The Welsh Government has not explained fully why it will be possible to implement the latter from April 2019 but the former only from April 2020. In addition, the Welsh Government has not addressed the question of how the views of young people have been considered developing these approaches.

Recommendation 2: There has been a range of work undertaken to consider the effectiveness of the Pupil Development Grant based on its current form, with a new approach taking effect from April 2019. The Committee may wish to enquire

about any ongoing evaluation that is planned for those new arrangements, on the assumption that the independent evaluation mentioned in the response relates to the current arrangements.

Recommendation 3: The Welsh Government has accepted the recommendation and has indicated how it intends to put more information in the public domain about the Improving Outcomes for Children Programme and the work of the Ministerial Advisory Group. However, the response sets out the Welsh Government's position that it does not intend to publish the minutes as recommended by the Committee, because of a concern that this may impede free and frank debate. The Committee may wish to consider whether it is satisfied in that regard.

The Welsh Government has noted the concerns expressed in the Committee's report about the Group taking on executive functions but emphasises that the arrangements are now well established and that the Welsh Government is ultimately responsible for the Improving Outcomes for Children Programme. Nevertheless, the Group's delivery role is perhaps emphasised by the response to recommendation 1 which describes the work that the Group has taken forward to measure progress against its work programme. The wording of the response appears to imply that the Group's main purpose is to provide advice to the Minister and that this is the basis on which publication of the minutes is rejected.

Recommendation 4: The Welsh Government accepts the recommendation and is issuing a new research tender. The Welsh Government has noted that the wording of the recommendation referred to examining different outcomes across the life of the child. The Welsh Government has suggested that this would require a longitudinal study but that is not exactly what is proposed, for the reasons set out in the response. The timescale for completing the research is also unclear. The response to recommendation 6 touches on a possible timescale but without a making a definitive commitment.

Recommendation 5: The response notes that the Welsh Government will consider the need to strengthen the Code of Practice that covers reviews of a child's care and support plan following changes to that plan. Rather than undertaking a stand-alone evaluation into the frequency and effectiveness of end of placement reviews, the Welsh Government indicates that it will ensure that this is specifically considered at future inspections of children's services by Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW). The Committee may wish to clarify with the Welsh Government what this means in practice for timescales and coverage across Wales in the context of CIW's wider work programme.

The Committee's report noted its understanding that CIW has been undertaking a thematic review of looked after children's services across Wales. The Committee might have expected that that review could provide relevant evidence about end of placement reviews, but it is not mentioned in the response. This too may merit

clarification. The Committee had been expecting publication of that review in March 2019 and indicated that it would consider the findings as part of its ongoing work.

Recommendation 6: While the substance of the response seems reasonable, given that the recommendation expected completion of an analysis of the delivery of placements within 12 months, the timeline for the research that would provide this analysis – the research mentioned in response to recommendation 4 – is non-committal. Flowing from that, the response suggests that new national commissioning could come into force in 2021-22 but without being clear whether that is a firm commitment. I would have expected that in issuing the research tender set out in response to recommendation 4, the Welsh Government would have set out an expected delivery timetable, although this may be reliant on its discussions with potential suppliers about the scope.

Recommendation 7: The Welsh Government has accepted the recommendation and says that it will consider the scope of the assessment of spend across services areas as part of the research outlined in response to other recommendations. However, the Welsh Government has reinforced that there may be limitations in its ability to assess the proportion of expenditure attributable to looked after children. This may mean that it is not able to address fully the concerns that the Committee set out in its report about the transparency of spending.

Recommendation 8: The comments above about the research described in response to recommendations 4, 6 and 7 are relevant here too. In addition, and despite accepting the recommendation, the response does not deal with the question of whether the Welsh Government intends to gather relevant information on a regular basis rather than simply through a one-off piece of research.

Recommendation 9: The Welsh Government has rejected the recommendation but has emphasised its expectation that local authorities should be focusing on reducing the need for care and providing effective support to families to enable them to remain together. The basis for rejecting the recommendation appears to be the Welsh Government's view that it would not be possible to explicitly assess the impact of transferring the previously ring-fenced grant funding for edge of care services into the Revenue Support Grant.

However, the Welsh Government could perhaps seek assurance on the level of ongoing spending on these services. This may provide an indication of whether there has been any disinvestment from these services since the transfer into the RSG. The Committee may therefore wish to confirm whether the Welsh Government will pro-actively monitor the level of spending on these services through its continued engagement with local authority and children's services partners.

Recommendation 10: While it does not mention kinship care specifically, the response appears reasonable. I am undertaking an examination of the Integrated Care Fund, to be reported this spring. The timing for this work means that it will not be examining the use of the additional £15 million of funding described in the response to the recommendation. Nevertheless, any scrutiny based on the findings of the report would provide an opportunity to explore this in more detail.

Finally, rather than exchanging further correspondence with the Welsh Government, the Committee could consider whether the Welsh Government's response merits a short follow-up evidence session with lead officials to clarify matters. The Committee could also confirm the expected timetable for any update on progress in response to the recommendations, taking account of ongoing plans for work in this area and any further interest in specific areas from the Children, Young People and Education Committee.

I trust that these observations are helpful to the Committee.

Yours sincerely



ADRIAN CROMPTON
Auditor General for Wales