

Chapter Six

Basic health and welfare

Child poverty

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Basic health and welfare

Standard of living

CONCLUDING OBSERVATION para.44. The UN Committee recommended the State party to:

- a) Undertake all necessary measures to the “maximum extent of available resources” to accelerate the elimination of child poverty;
- b) Better co-ordinate and reinforce its efforts to address the causes of youth homelessness and its consequences; and
- c) Review its legislation and policies concerning benefits and social security allowances for 16 to 18 year olds

Relevant Articles of UNCRC: Articles 4, 6, 18, 26, 27.

Commentary on progress

- a) **State party should undertake all necessary measures to the “maximum extent of available resources” to accelerate the elimination of child poverty.**

Levels of child poverty have fallen in Wales since 2002 but 27% of children are still living in poverty.¹ This equates to approximately 190,000 children. Although not recorded in the UK Government’s income poverty statistics, children of asylum seekers and migrant workers are living on incomes far below subsistence levels.² The odds of a baby being poor in Wales are significantly higher than in England and children in Wales have the worst well-being in the UK.³ Families in rural areas report limited access to services and feeling isolated.⁴ Comparing child poverty across the UK is not easy; data is not always available at a national level and is not always comparable.⁵ The Welsh Assembly Government should give priority to regular monitoring of child well-being in Wales, which measures progress over time and can be compared across the UK. It should develop mechanisms for the measurement of severe and persistent poverty⁶ and a more detailed profile of children most vulnerable.

Tax and benefits are non-devolved issues but the Welsh Assembly Government has made representations to the UK Government in relation to Child Benefit, Child Tax Credit and the abolishment of Single Room Rent. Representations should also be made in relation to giving an amnesty on overpayments of Tax Credit; and replacing the current system of Social Fund loans.

It is difficult to discern whether or not the Welsh Assembly Government (or indeed the UK Government) are undertaking all necessary measures to accelerate the elimination of child poverty to the “maximum extent of available resources” because the detail of monies spent on achieving this objective and the detail of the ‘available’ resources are not made clear. Earlier in this report (see page 16) it is argued that in line with Article 4 of the UN Convention, the Welsh Assembly Government should produce a ‘children’s budget’ setting out estimates of the proportions and amounts that it is spending on the children of Wales. The Welsh Assembly Government could also usefully provide additional analysis of what is actually being directed towards poor children in Wales, i.e. children living in households with below 60% of the median income.

There is no doubt that the Welsh Assembly Government has begun to take the high levels of child poverty in Wales very seriously and is now directing attention to combat what our Children's Commissioner has referred to as our 'national disgrace'.⁷ The Welsh Assembly Government working alongside the UK Government in a joint pledge to end child poverty by the year 2020 is a very welcome development.

A child poverty strategy for Wales?

After campaigning by the End Child Poverty Network Cymru,⁸ the Welsh Assembly Government set up an independent Child Poverty Task Group in 2003 to inform the development of a child poverty strategy for Wales. The Task Group⁹ included government officials, NGOs and academics and their deliberations were informed by consultations with children and young people. The Task Group's report made a number of recommendations on key devolved policy areas that impact on child poverty including education, health, housing and the environment and skills and employment. Evidence provided to the Task Group indicated that poor children in Wales can feel isolated, left out at school and generally stigmatised by their socio-economic status. Poor children reported being bullied because of their 'difference' from other children accentuated by their receipt of free school meals and by not having the proper school uniform. These findings echo those of the Children's Commissioner for Wales¹⁰ and a study by Save the Children.¹¹

In February 2005, the Welsh Assembly Government published its child poverty strategy *A Fair Future for Our Children*.¹² The strategy gives a commitment to eradicating child poverty in Wales by 2020 and (building on a set of core values in line with the UNCRC) sets out key action in policy areas where the Assembly Government has devolved responsibility. Encouragingly, the strategy recognises the importance of a public education campaign to dispel myths about child poverty and sets out action to try to reduce the stigma and shame felt by poor children. The strategy includes an additional £50 million targeted on early years, in the most deprived areas of Wales with at least one integrated centre in each local authority area. This will need to be extended if these services are to be available to children in poverty wherever they live.

Recognising the crosscutting nature of child poverty, the Assembly Government's Cabinet Subcommittee on Children and Young People has been given responsibility for driving and monitoring progress in taking forward the strategy. Implementation of the strategy will also form part of the annual discussions between Ministers and Funky Dragon, the children and young people's assembly in Wales. The Deputy Minister for Social Justice and Regeneration in the Assembly Government has been tasked with turning the strategy into an Action Plan.

End Child Poverty Network Cymru believes it is essential that the action plan contains specific targets and milestones by which to measure progress. The Assembly Government will need to ensure that the strategy is a priority for action by local government and that there are sufficient resources to deliver on the strategic objectives. They need to re-consider the stature of the child poverty strategy with regard to funding and cross-departmental focus and support. To achieve results, the child poverty strategy needs to be recognised in all relevant Assembly Government strategies. All Assembly Government Directorates and local government need to have a greater awareness of it and its implications. It is important that monitoring is followed through both in terms of delivering on the child poverty strategy but also 'proofing' new policy developments to identify the likely impact, positive or negative, on child poverty.

Related Welsh Assembly Government initiatives

Communities First, a Welsh Assembly Government flagship programme provides targeted support to aid the regeneration of the most deprived communities in Wales. The programme aspires to increase the level of participation of local people, although existing Assembly Government guidance is weak on the participation of children and young people. Save the Children has made representation to the Assembly Government about the need to strengthen the guidance and to identify some dedicated support and training to increase children and young people's participation in *Communities First*. A paper on this was considered by the Welsh Assembly Government's Cabinet sub-committee in April, 2005¹³ and new guidance is expected in 2006.

One of the Welsh Assembly Government's core aims for children states that children should not be disadvantaged by poverty. *Cymorth*, a unified fund, provides a mechanism for promoting this core aim by providing targeted support for children and their families in disadvantaged areas (via local authority led Partnerships). In 2003-4, *the Cymorth Fund* was nearly £40 million. The Assembly Government has agreed an additional £29 million for *Cymorth* over the period 2005-8 in addition to a share of the early years' initiative announced with the child poverty strategy.¹⁴

A Welsh Assembly Government report¹⁵ outlines some of the projects supported by *Cymorth* during its first year. It is important to recognise that many children living in poverty do not live in the targeted (Communities First) areas¹⁶ (which are the priority for the *Cymorth fund*) and will miss out on the benefits of this additional support. This makes the role of mainstream services crucial. There should be a focus on early intervention to support children and their families and further provision of this kind should be made more widely available.

Since March 2003, the Welsh Assembly Government has financed free swimming for children in the school holidays. Younger children however must be accompanied by a paying adult which may impact on low-income families' ability to participate. In November 2004 the Welsh Assembly Government gave a commitment to provide all primary school children with free school breakfasts by January 2007. While this is welcome, the Welsh Assembly Government's initiative will need to put sufficient focus on the nutritional content of the breakfasts and ensure that sufficient funds are available to meet demand.

Education

There are clear links between poverty and educational attainment. Social mobility has declined, rather than improved in Britain since 1997¹⁷ and the link between educational attainment and social mobility is central to this. The percentage of children in Wales leaving school without any qualification has fallen but the rate for both boys and girls in Wales is still the highest in the UK.¹⁸ A joint task group¹⁹ examined the factors which contribute to the gap in performance between schools in prosperous and deprived areas and found that successful outcomes could be achieved even where school circumstances are challenging and demonstrated that deprivation does not necessarily lead to poor performance. Recommendations made in the report should be implemented urgently.

The average cost of school per year for one child is £563 in primary and £948 in secondary school.²⁰ Disadvantaged children feel stigmatised because they cannot afford to take part in school trips or buy proper school uniform.^{21 22} There are wide variations in availability and eligibility of local education authority financial help towards the cost of a school uniform. In July 2005 the Welsh Assembly Government introduced a grant of £85, under section 14 of the Education Act 2002, to help families pay for school uniform. All pupils eligible for free school meals entering secondary school in Autumn 2005 are eligible for the grant. While welcome this is insufficient to cover the average £185 cost of a school uniform at secondary level.²³ The Welsh Assembly Government has issued guidance to school

governing bodies recommending that the cost implications be considered before choosing a particular uniform and has also encouraged schools to provide free meals in non-stigmatising ways. In order to ensure these guidelines have some impact on policy in individual schools however, they need to be widely publicised and monitored. Current guidance is not adequately monitored and individual school policies vary widely.

Health

Health inequalities are considered in Dr Elspeth Webb's paper on page 70. The *National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services (NSF)*²⁴ launched in September 2005 recognises the inequity of health outcomes for children living in poverty. It contains action points in relation to participation in planning and evaluating services, advocacy and information on benefit entitlement. The *NSF* will only be effective if there is a detailed timetable for implementation. The Welsh Assembly Government itself acknowledges that key actions within the *NSF* will only have any real impact on health inequality if properly resourced and monitored.

b) State party should better co-ordinate and reinforce its efforts to address the causes of youth homelessness and its consequences.

Homelessness in Wales has risen since 2002 and between 1997 and 2003 there has been a 47% increase in homeless presentations, a 100% increase in homeless acceptances, and a 486% increase in the use of Bed and Breakfast accommodation.²⁵ According to the Welsh Assembly Government statistics for the period 2003-4, 178 young people 18-21 years old at risk and 937 young people 16 or 17 years old at risk were homeless. This number is only a proportion of those who are actually homeless as numbers of young people sleep rough on the streets and end up sleeping on sofas or floors in the homes of friends and relatives.

One of the first pieces of secondary legislation passed by the National Assembly for Wales was the *Homeless Persons (Priority Need) (Wales) Order 2001* which came into force on March 1st 2001 to extend statutory protection to a range of new vulnerable groups including 16 and 17 year olds and care leavers aged 18-21 years. The Welsh Assembly Government was the first administration in the UK to extend the duties of local authorities to these groups.

The *Homelessness Act 2002* requires local authorities to carry out reviews of homelessness, and formulate strategies for preventing and tackling homelessness in their areas. In 2004-05 the Welsh Assembly Government made £4.917 million available for voluntary sector schemes aimed at tackling homelessness in Wales (compared with £60 million in England and £20 million in Scotland).²⁶

The Welsh Assembly Government launched its National Homelessness Strategy²⁷ in March 2003 and reviewed it in January 2005. The key issues to emerge were that the Strategy should focus more on preventative approaches and address contradictory policies and practices that undermine anti-homelessness strategies such as anti-social behaviour policies and practices that seek to reduce arrears without considering the consequences of possession and eviction. To improve understanding of local housing markets and of current and possible future causes of homelessness, more work gathering and analysing data at a local level should take place. There is a need to address the lack of affordable housing in Wales and for the provision of adequate resources at all levels to support the strategy. The Welsh Assembly Government is currently developing a new strategy which will need to address these concerns.

c) State party should review its legislation and policies concerning benefits and social security allowances for 16 to 18 year olds.

Benefits and social security allowances for 16 and 17 year olds are non-devolved. There is no evidence to support the claim that living costs are lower for young people who cannot rely on their families for financial support and the current benefit system still fails to offer protection to vulnerable 16 and 17 year olds. A report from the Social Exclusion Unit²⁸ identified the complexity and accessibility of financial support as a major barrier to participation in education and training for young people. The recommendations in this report were examined by a cross-Government Review of Financial Support for 16-19 year olds²⁹ which was published alongside the Budget in March 2004. Over the next 3 years, the proposals centre round the intention to amend Child Benefit and Child Tax Credit rules for the families of 16-19 year olds, to support young people to finish their courses. There are also plans starting April 2006 to improve and simplify the processing of claims for Job Seekers Allowance by 16 and 17 year olds under the estrangement criteria and improved guidance for parents and young people on financial support. The review also sets out a long-term plan for financial support beyond 2007 of a single, coherent system that supports and gives incentives for young people to remain in post-compulsory education and unwaged training, by building on the current Education Maintenance Allowance/Child Tax Credit model of support.

Some benefits have recently been introduced by the Welsh Assembly Government to support young people to stay on in education. From September 2004 the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), a weekly grant has been available to help young people from low-income families stay on in education after 16. The Welsh Assembly Government is also funding the Welsh Assembly Learning Grant (ALG), which provides extra money for students from low-income families when undertaking further education (FE) or higher education (HE). School activity funds should also be made available. Transport has been identified by young people as a key issue³⁰ when accessing education and training. The Welsh Assembly Government are developing a scheme to guarantee half-fare travel for all 16-18 year olds on bus services which will be piloted in one or two local authorities in winter 2005.

Conclusion

There has been a considerable amount of progress since 2002 in moving child poverty up the political agenda in Wales and indeed across the UK. However, there is currently a gap between the Welsh Assembly Government's high aspirations and the experiences of children and young people living in poverty. The Welsh Assembly Government must ensure that sufficient resources are assigned to tackling child poverty, that its child poverty strategy is given higher priority and that more urgency is given to developing its action plan which has been slow to materialise. In particular it must engage with delivery partners and gain their commitment and be explicit about their role in tackling child poverty.

Key recommendations

The Welsh Assembly Government should:

- Give priority to regular monitoring of child well-being in Wales, which measures progress over time and can be compared across the UK.
- Develop mechanisms for the measurement of severe and persistent poverty and extract a more detailed profile of children most vulnerable so it can target its resources on those most in need.

- Ensure that its Child Poverty Strategy:
 - contains specific targets and milestones,
 - that it is recognised in other strategies, and other Welsh Assembly Government Directorates,
 - that it is made a priority for action by local government,
 - that sufficient resources are given to implement it.
- Address the lack of affordable housing in Wales through the provision of adequate resources to support the strategy that it is currently developing to address these concerns.

In addition:

- Recommendations made in “*Narrowing the Gap in the Performance of Schools*” (2002) should be implemented urgently.
- Gathering and analysing data at a local level should take place to improve understanding of local housing markets and of current and possible future causes of homelessness.

Endnotes

¹ Department for Work and Pensions (2005) *Households Below Average Income (HBAI) statistics 1994/5-2003/04*, Sixteenth Edition.

² Preston, G. (Ed.) (2005) *At Greatest Risk: The Children most likely to be poor*, Child Poverty Action Group.

³ Bradshaw, J. and Mayhew, E. (2005) *The Wellbeing of Children in the UK*, Save the Children.

⁴ Sharpe, T. (2003) *The good life? The impact of rural poverty on family life in Wales*, NCH Cymru and Barnardo's Cymru.

⁵ Bradshaw, J. and Mayhew, E. (2005) *The Wellbeing of Children in the UK*, Save the Children.

⁶ Children in severe poverty are defined as those living in households with income below 27% of median income, while persistent poverty is defined as three or more years in households with income below 60% median income. See Adleman L., Middleton S. and Ashworth K (2003) *Britain's Poorest Children: Severe and persistent poverty and social exclusion*. Save the Children.

⁷ Children's Commissioner for Wales (2002) *First Annual Report 2001-2*.

⁸ The members of the network are: Children in Wales, Barnardos Cymru, Save the Children Wales, NCH Cymru, NSPCC Cymru, Childline Cymru/Wales, Child Poverty Action Group, National Public Health Service for Wales, Fairbridge Cymru, Citizens Advice Bureau, Frank Buttle Trust, Shelter Cymru, Children's Commissioner for Wales.

⁹ Welsh Assembly Government (2004) *Child Poverty Task Group Consultation*.

¹⁰ Children's Commissioner for Wales (2002) *First Annual Report 2001-2002*.

¹¹ Crowley, A. and Vulliamy, C. (2003) *Listen Up! Children and Young People Talk: About Poverty*, Save the Children.

¹² Welsh Assembly Government (2005) *A Fair Future For Our Children – The Strategy of the Welsh Assembly for tackling child poverty*.

¹³ Welsh Assembly Government, Cabinet sub-committee (April 2005) *Involving Children and Young People in Communities First Activity CYP(04-05)28*.

¹⁴ Welsh Assembly Government (2005) *A Fair Future For Our Children – The Strategy of the Welsh Assembly for tackling child poverty*.

¹⁵ Welsh Assembly Government (2005) *Cymorth – Funding for a Better Childhood and Family Life in Wales – A Review of the Inaugural Year of the Cymorth Fund*.

¹⁶ Welsh Assembly Government (2004) *Child Poverty Task Group Consultation*.