



Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru
Welsh Assembly Government

WRITTEN STATEMENT BY THE WELSH ASSEMBLY GOVERNMENT

Title: Disabled Children Matter Wales Campaign

Date: 16 May 2008

By: Jane Hutt, Minister for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills

In December I reported on the work which is being undertaken with the Disabled Children Matter Campaign in Wales to improve the life chances and equal opportunities of our disabled children and young people.

In April we saw the first transfer of powers to the Assembly through a Legislative Competence Order and it is particularly relevant that these powers relate to Special Educational Needs. The new powers will allow the Welsh Assembly Government to bring forward Welsh laws, called Assembly Measures, on Special Educational Needs (SEN) provision. The new laws will enable the Assembly to tackle issues surrounding additional learning needs and make a real difference to the lives of this often vulnerable group of children and young people.

The Welsh Assembly Government is committed to providing every child and young person with the opportunity to reach their potential so that they can play a full and active part in the life of their community. Seeking powers early on in this regard gives us a unique opportunity to ensure services are provided in a timely and appropriate manner and allows children with a disability and their families the opportunity to shape those services that affect their lives.

Much of this cannot happen overnight and I am committed to ensuring full consultation on any proposed changes to legislation and the piloting of new ways of working to ensure we safeguard the rights of disabled children and their families and also safeguard provision and delivery of the services they require.

As promised in my December statement, I have established a task group of campaign members and senior officials which has to date met on two occasions and will also meet again later this week. In addition, I have met with campaign members and will continue to do so on a regular basis to ensure we drive this very important agenda forward over the life of this Assembly Government.

As Minister for Children, and Chair of the Children's Cabinet Committee for Children and Young People, I am co-ordinating this important initiative which cuts across Ministerial portfolios on behalf of the Welsh Assembly Government. Following my last statement I have met with the relevant Ministers to ensure we continue to work together to develop policies that improve services in this area. To that end we have been able to secure additional funding for 2008/09 of £1.54 m for the continued funding of short breaks, a key recommendation of the DCMW Campaign. We are currently in the process of evaluating the funding provided last year and I have asked the task group to advise me on how funds are distributed that can build on existing examples of best practice.

I also announced in December funding of £225,000 for the provision of Changing Places facilities to widen access to cultural venues. The Department for Heritage has been working with Mencap Cymru to finalise the details of this project and I expect the phase 1 facilities to be completed this summer and the phase 2 facilities by 2009. Phase 1 will provide 2 mobile facilities. Phase 2 will enable a number of existing cultural venues to install Changing Places facilities. In addition, my colleague Jane Davidson, Minister for Environment, Sustainability and Housing, is this month issuing a consultation document on revisions to planning policy Technical Advice Note 12: Design which will encourage the inclusion of accessible 'Changing Places' toilet facilities in plans for new and public commercial buildings.

We are working closely with campaigners and other voluntary sector organisations on the delivery of early support materials for use on a multi agency basis across Wales. Early Support will improve the quality, consistency and coordination of services for disabled children under the age of five and their families. In December I announced an allocation of £1m for the initial development of materials which is now well underway. Over a period of 3 years to 2011 to 2012 I have decided that a further £1.2 m will be allocated to ensure that the programme is fully embedded in the training of professionals and in the delivery of materials to families across Wales.

My December announcement also included the continuation of funding to support disabled children's access to play. The Task and Finish Group will have an important role in refining Cymorth guidance to local authorities, to make the best use of the opportunity provided by this funding of £1m per annum.

At the end of May, I will be again reporting on progress in meeting the recommendations of the Equality Opportunity Committee report on Service

Provision for Disabled Young People (January 2007). Much of the focus of this report and that of the former Education Lifelong Learning and Skills Committee's review of SEN (Part 3) focused on transition post 16. I was delighted to announce in November funding of £500,000 continuing for three years for the development of key transition workers to support young people moving into further education and employment. We are working closely with Care Co-ordination UK to ensure a consistent approach to key working across Wales that will enable agencies to meet the standards set in the National Service Framework for Children Young People and Maternity Services.

I was also delighted last week to launch along with my colleague Gwenda Thomas, Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services the Action Plan for Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) Strategic Action Plan for Wales. Wales is the first country in the world to have established a cross-cutting national strategic Action Plan for ASD that will help the estimated 30,000 people that are either directly or indirectly affected by Autism in Wales. Funding for the next 3 years have been identified with the first year's funding of £1.8m being announced to drive forward its key actions.

The Strategic Action Plan will deliver improvements across services for children, young people's and adults in health, social services and education and also expand into areas of housing, leisure and society in general.

Edwina Hart, Minister for Health and Social Services has commissioned a review of all wheelchair provision in Wales, encompassing long term and short term loans and paediatric wheelchair services. The Review will recommend Service Standards and Specifications for the delivery of wheelchair services and identify resource requirements to deliver the service for future years. This work will be set in the wider context of a strategy for independent living.

'One Wales' commits the Assembly Government to ensuring that comprehensive benefit advice is available in all local authority areas. Whilst responsibility for the welfare benefits system rests with the Department of Work and Pensions, we work closely with them on such reserved matters. Income maximisation features as one of the five key themes of the proposed Financial Inclusion Strategy for Wales which is being developed over the course of this year. As part of the Strategy we will look at further ways in which we can help people, including low income families with children, maximise the uptake of the benefits they are entitled to. The Deputy Minister for Regeneration recently concluded the Communities Next consultation which encourages Communities First Partnerships to take forward locally the five key themes of the Financial Inclusion Strategy. This includes commitments that Partnerships should work more closely with Job Centre Plus and other partners on income maximisation – including stimulating benefit take up. My Colleague, the Minister for Social Justice and Local Government and his officials will also take the opportunity through UK level groups such as the Four Nations Forum on Child Poverty to ensure that awareness of the importance of benefit uptake support for disabled children and their families is understood by the Department for Work and Pensions.

Members of the Disabled Children Matter Wales Campaign are to be given the opportunity to present their views on the issues faced by disabled children and their families in relation to benefit take-up to the newly established Child Poverty Expert Group.

The Minister for Social Justice and Local Government has also begun consultation on a proposal for 50% rate relief for child care providers with property having a rateable value of up to £12,000 a year. A proposal welcomed by the sector.

For the first time this year the Welsh Assembly Government will also be producing a Single Equality Scheme, which will encompass the existing schemes for disability, gender and race and build on these by also addressing age, religion and belief and sexual orientation. We are out to consultation now on the framework and priorities and I am very keen to obtain views to ensure that we shape our scheme and action plans to tackle these difficulties and secure the best outcomes for disabled young people.

A key part of our commitment to equality, diversity and human rights is our work to build equality firmly into our own day to day business. We have piloted a process through which our policies are subjected to an equality impact assessment. This enables us to focus on issues which matter to disabled people and children and young people as we are developing our policies. We are now about to roll this out across the Welsh Assembly Government, taking on board the work we have done, helped by partners in the voluntary and statutory sector, such as the Equality and Human Rights Commission and the WCVA.

I am pleased that we are now moving this agenda forward pro-actively across ministerial portfolios and steady progress is being made. I have asked the Task Group to consider a communications campaign that pulls together the various activities that I have outlined around services for disabled children and young people to promote awareness and provide a co-ordinated approach to service delivery building on best practice from across Wales.