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Children and Young People Committee: Inquiry into Childhood Obesity

January 2014



WLGA • CLILC

INTRODUCTION

1. The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) represents the 22 local authorities in Wales, the three national park authorities and the three fire and rescue authorities.
2. It seeks to provide representation to local authorities within an emerging policy framework that satisfies the key priorities of our members and delivers a broad range of services that add value to Welsh Local Government and the communities they serve.
3. The WLGA is guided by a number of key principles which underpin the work of the Association and have helped to shape the response to the inquiry on obesity in children in Wales. The WLGA believes that decisions about services should be taken as close to the point of delivery as possible and that the people and communities using those services should be as engaged as much as possible in their delivery. It is also our belief that local services should be provided within a democratic framework of local accountability.
4. The WLGA recognises that it is the role of the Welsh Government to set the strategic framework and policy direction for services at a national level, and that it is the role of local government to deliver those services taking account of the local circumstances and pressures. It is also recognised that services must be provided within a proportionate but effective regulatory framework to ensure that public resources are used appropriately and that services are delivered effectively and efficiently.
5. The WLGA has consistently argued for an un-hypothecated revenue support grant (RSG) as the best way of funding local government and any new responsibilities or additional burdens placed on local government should be fully costed and appropriately funded.
6. The WLGA recognises that some policy initiatives or strategies need to have funding attached to them for specific periods of time to make sure that they become embedded and are delivered as intended. For this reason, the WLGA, by exception, supports the use of specific grants or the ring fencing of revenue

funding for specified purposes on the understanding that funding will eventually return to the RSG.

7. The WLGA is pleased to be able to respond to the Children and Young People Committee inquiry into childhood obesity. Promoting the well-being of children and young people in Wales is of paramount importance to local authorities and addressing the issue of childhood obesity is seen as a key priority. The recent *Child Measurement Programme for Wales* (2013) shows that during 2011-12 70% of four and five year olds were within the healthy weight range, however, just over 28% were overweight or obese, and in comparison with the rest of the UK Wales has the highest level of childhood obesity. Reducing the number of children who are obese or overweight is essential because the factors which lead to obesity, poor nutrition and lack of exercise, can result in diminished life chances for children and young people which can last into adulthood. In partnership with other public sector agencies, local authorities have a clear role to play in promoting and supporting the well-being of their communities and providing services which enable children and young people to lead healthy and fulfilling lives.
8. It is clear that Wales has a particular issue with childhood obesity and that effectively tackling this issue will require a number of agencies, including local authorities, to work in partnership in line with the strategic priorities of the Welsh Government. The recently published Welsh Government early years and childcare plan, *Building a Brighter Future*, highlights the issue of childhood obesity set within the context of an overall strategy to provide children in Wales with the best possible start in life. The WLGA supports this work and is working closely with Welsh Government to ensure that the strategy is effectively implemented within local authorities. The strategy also details the role that other public sector organisations have to play in order to achieve effective implementation, this includes the health sector. For example, the plan links providing good maternity services and breast feeding support with the implementation of the Healthy Schools (Wales) Measure as part of an overall strategy to address childhood obesity. The WLGA and local authorities in Wales strongly support this collective approach to addressing this issue, as it recognises that multiple interventions are required in order to reduce the number of children and young people in Wales who are obese or overweight.

9. *Building a Brighter Future* also highlights research which suggests that childhood obesity is more prevalent in areas of deprivation in Wales. The Welsh Government's *Tackling Poverty Action Plan* specifically looks at childhood obesity as a proxy measure for deprivation. There are a number of ways in which local authorities play a specific role in addressing this issue, for example through the provision of school meals and in particular providing free school meals for those who are eligible. School food has an important role to play in ensuring that all children and young people are able to access a filling and nutritious meal during their school day. In addition to the health benefits, there is evidence to suggest that children and young people are more likely to engage with learning and have higher levels of concentration if they receive nutritious meal. This is particularly important for children who are not receiving the appropriate levels of nutrition outside of school.
10. It is vital that those who are eligible for free school meals access that service, not only in order to promote improved learning and concentration but also to enable children and young people to access a nutritious and well balanced meal whilst at school. The *Free School Meals Case Study Report*, by Welsh Government in March 2013, specifically investigated stigma around free school meal take up. Pupils in 8 secondary schools in Wales were questioned on what affected their take up of school meals. Each questionnaire asked the pupils if they were entitled to free school meals or not. This was to identify differences in responses between FSM pupils and non FSM pupil. The key findings identified that the main concern for FSM pupils taking up their entitlement was queuing. This report goes into detail about concerns of the children and young people and how a school may overcome some of the issues. The schools census 2011 provides the most recent data on free school meal take up:
- All maintained schools (primary, secondary and special schools) - 84,806 pupils entitled to FSM - 73.85% took up their entitlement on census day.
 - Secondary school – 32,314 pupils entitled to FSM - 68.39% took up their entitlement on census day.
 - Primary school – 39,420 (97.52%) primary pupils took up their free school meal entitlement on census day, in year 2010/11 40,422 pupils were entitled to FSM.

11. Local authorities are working to overcome issues which are a barrier to take up of free school meals and many schools already operate cashless systems in order to try and reduce the stigma associated with free school meals. Local authorities are also looking at the design and layout of dining areas within schools in order to encourage more children and young people to opt for school meals rather than leaving the school site where they are more likely to buy food which does not meet nutritional standards. This work is central to the plans being developed as part of the overall school building improvement programme, 21st Century Schools.

12. The provision of free school meals and ensuring capital investment improves facilities in schools, local authorities and schools are fully engaged in improving the nutritional content of school meals in line with provision in the Health Schools (Wales) Measure. Local authorities have been supported in this work through the Appetite for Life programme which has been managed through the WLGA. A key part of this work has been to support local authorities and schools (including those schools which have opted out of local authority management of school meals) to ensure that meals are meeting the nutritional standards. Central to this work has been providing access to a national wide tool, Saffron, which enables local authorities and schools to easily analyse the nutritional content of meals and ensure that school food is meeting the required standard. This has been a significant piece of work for local authorities and schools in Wales and has resulted in an improvement in the standards of meals being provided in schools. The Appetite for Life team have supported schools and local authorities during this transition period and have provided training to enable them to manage this process and will continue to do so.

13. In order to monitor compliance with the nutritional standards Estyn, when carrying out school inspections, will look at whether the nutritional standards are being met to ensure that children and young people have access to healthy food within the school setting. This information will also now be presented in the annual report from school governors. Both these developments are welcomed by the WLGA.

14. Schools also have a key role in ensuring that children and young people are aware of the factors which contribute to a healthy lifestyle, which includes both good nutrition and the benefits of activity and exercise. Involvement in schemes such as the Healthy Network of Schools has proved to be beneficial

and provides support for teachers when addressing these issues as part of the curriculum. Schools have also been keen to increase participation in sport through involvement with physical activity programmes and it is evident that involvement in sport is increasing in Wales. The Sport Wales, School Sports Survey shows that involvement of sports within a school setting is key to increasing participation in physical activity and also that the vast majority of children and young people in Wales enjoy participating in sport. In addition the survey showed that children and young people have a good understanding of the connection between physical activity and being healthy. The work of Sport Wales showed that participation in physical activity amongst children and young people increased in 2013 to 40% from 28% in 2009. There remained however, a gap in participation levels between boys and girls, although both groups saw an increase in overall involvement in sports and physical activity.

15. The work of local authorities in enabling access to sporting facilities and also to more informal physical activity such as play, is essential if this increase in participation in physical activity is to be maintained. It is the case, however, that local authorities along with the rest of the public sector is facing an unprecedented reduction in the level of funding available to support such services. Many local authorities in Wales are looking for innovative solutions to address these issues, such as working with the voluntary or private sector. Work undertaken by the Institute of Fiscal Studies for the WLGA, however, shows that future funding for local authorities will continue to be put under pressure. This is why it is essential that tackling childhood obesity is seen as the responsibility of a number of public sector agencies including schools and local authorities.

16. Research indicates that interventions based in schools alone will only have a limited impact on the levels of childhood obesity. Lifestyle choices within the home have a far greater impact on overall levels of obesity. Local authorities have a role to play in providing broad public health messages about healthy lifestyles and also via more targeted services through initiatives such as Families First and Flying Start. Both of these programmes are aimed at providing support for families which includes parenting support and working with families to provide a safe and healthy environment for children. Ensuring that parents are aware of how to create this sort of environment, including providing appropriate nutrition for children, is an essential part of these

schemes. Flying Start in particular targets families who live in areas of deprivation.

17. Local authorities continue to be committed to ensuring that children and young people in Wales are given every opportunity to fulfil their potential and it is recognised that tackling the issue of childhood obesity is an essential part of this work. The WLGA and local authorities recognise that reducing the level of childhood obesity in Wales can only be achieved through joint working with other agencies including the health service and the voluntary sector, and also through working with children, young people and families across Wales.

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