



# Comisiynydd Plant Cymru Children's Commissioner for Wales

## Keith Towler

### Ymateb i Ymgynghoriad / Consultation Response

Date/Dyddiad

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Subject/Subject

**Inquiry into Educational Outcomes for Children from Low Income Households**

The Children's Commissioner for Wales is an independent children's rights institution established in 2001. The Commissioner's principal aim is to safeguard and promote the rights and welfare of children<sup>1</sup>. In exercising his functions, the Commissioner must have regard to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).<sup>2</sup> The Commissioner's remit covers all areas of the devolved powers of the National Assembly for Wales insofar as they affect children's rights and welfare.<sup>3</sup>

The UNCRC is an international human rights treaty that applies to all children and young people up to the age of 18. It is the most widely ratified international human rights instrument and gives children and young people a wide range of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights which State Parties to the Convention are expected to implement. In 2004, the Welsh Assembly Government adopted the UNCRC as the basis of all policy making for children and young people and in 2011, Welsh Government passed the Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Section 72A Care Standards Act 2000

<sup>2</sup> Regulation 22 Children's Commissioner for Wales Regulations 2001

<sup>3</sup> Section 75A (1) Care Standards Act 2000

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.assemblywales.org/bus-home/bus-legislation/bus-leg-measures/business-legislationmeasuresrightsofchildren.htm>

## **Introduction**

Welsh Government published 'Child Poverty Strategy for Wales: Baseline indicators'<sup>1</sup> in March of this year. This report provides an evaluation of Welsh Child Poverty Strategy baseline data for 2005 and a comparison with the most recent year's data across 23 indicators related to income poverty, education, housing and health. It is of great concern to me that progress is only evidenced in relation to 6 of the 23 indicators considered in the report. I am aware that the current economic situation is a challenging one and that the Welfare Reforms being pushed forward by the UK Government are anticipated to impact in particular on families with children. However within this context it is particularly worrying that progress in addressing the impact of child poverty by Welsh Government appears to be so limited. There is clear evidence that now, more than ever, Welsh Government must review their approach and consider robust and directed action to address the needs and promote the rights of children and young people in poverty.

Child poverty is the result of family poverty. However a child poverty approach to tackling the issue is essentially different from a family poverty approach. A child poverty approach puts the child at the centre of all policy measures and acknowledges the child as a rights bearer with rights that extend beyond the family. Once framed in a child rights context, based on the UNCRC the distinctiveness of a child poverty approach becomes clear and should drive all policy initiatives to combat child poverty.

Every child and young person has the right to an education (article 28 of UNCRC) and to an education that is directed to the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential (article 29 of the UNCRC).

Evidence presented by Estyn in relation to school effectiveness in tackling poverty and disadvantage was published in 2012<sup>2</sup> and provides a strong case for the importance of supporting pupil well-being in order to secure attainment. The report suggests that effective schools in challenging circumstances take a whole-school approach which involves coherent and structured systems to raise achievement. This approach is based on an understanding of the relationship between pupil well-being and standards. As a result there is a focus on developing the social and

emotional skills and supporting the social and emotional needs of learners. Effective schools also place importance on listening to learners and providing them with opportunities to participate fully in the life of the school. Estyn also identified the fact that effective schools engage learners in a rich extra-curricular offer and engage well with parents and carers to help them and their children overcome barriers to learning. Effective schools have a persistent focus on good attendance, punctuality and positive behavior, had suitable sanctions in place but found that reward systems work particularly well. Estyn identify 10 elements of good practice in total. I also am aware that Estyn's latest annual report, published earlier this year, identifies that of the five secondary schools with excellent performance inspected in 2011- 12, three have about a quarter or more of their pupils entitled to free schools meals and these pupils perform well. Estyn set out that this is because the schools concerned take a whole-school, strategic approach to tackling disadvantage. Evidence suggests that solutions for reducing the poverty gap in education can be found in holistic and mutually reinforcing approaches that unite schools, parents and communities. However the latest Estyn annual report suggests that only a 'few schools' are supporting disadvantaged learners well and that schools do not share best practice or collaborate well with each other on this issue.

I published a Child Poverty Strategy in October 2012 which I will update in October this year. The strategy considers the importance of support for pupil well-being in securing educational engagement and improved attainment among pupils from low-income households. As part of the work to update the Strategy I have recently facilitated an evidence exchange exercise to gather evidence on good practice in, and barriers to, supporting disadvantaged learners. Directors of Education across Wales were asked to nominate representatives to attend an evidence exchange meeting on 5 September or to provide a telephone interview. I received responses from 19 of the 22 local authorities. The majority of representatives who contributed are officers with lead responsibility for pupil well-being and inclusion. The evidence gathered has informed this submission. However further detailed information about examples of good practice is being provided to me by those who contributed to the exchange over the coming weeks and I would be happy to provide this to the Committee as supplementary evidence once available.

**1. The effectiveness of Welsh Government policy and strategy in mitigating the link between poverty and educational outcomes, including the 'Tackling Poverty Action Plan'; relevant education policy; and broader Welsh Government policies in this regard, for example Communities First.**

I set out my concerns about the decision to integrate action on child poverty into an overarching Tackling Poverty Action Plan that includes children and adults when I published my last annual report. The Consultation Draft Child Poverty Delivery Plan (2011) adopted a child's rights approach framed within the 7 Core Aims and I have raised concerns with Welsh Government about the loss of this approach within the Tackling Poverty Action Plan when it was published in 2012.

The refreshed plan 'Building Resilient Communities: Taking forward the Tackling Poverty Action Plan' was published in June 2013 and has a stronger emphasis on issues for children and young people than the 2012 Plan. I am pleased that Welsh Government sets out its ambition to increase the pace of improvement for those pupils eligible for free school meals so that the gap between them and their peer is narrowed. The Plan includes clear targets through Flying Start so that children reach their development milestones and are ready for school and for narrowing the attainment gap between learners eligible for free school meals and their peers at the end of the Foundation Phase and at Key Stage 4. However the milestone set out under these targets is to *'consider how new reading and numeracy tests might support us in raising expectations for learners eligible for free schools means – by 2015'*. I am disappointed that the Plan and milestones do not include actions on taking forward developments in support of pupil well-being in light of clear evidence from Estyn on the effectiveness of such an approach.

I have welcomed the fact that Welsh Government have invested in a programme of initiatives such as Flying Start, Families First and IFSS designed to provide early intervention and support to families in a holistic way. The pioneer phases of these initiatives are now complete and local authority delivery across Wales has progressed in 2012. Welsh Government investment in the flagship family support programmes is considerable and local authorities and their partners have been working in a landscape of considerable policy and practice change in order to implement these. The fact that each of these programmes is targeted at vulnerable children and their families and that a system of

on-going evaluation is in place is significant for me in terms of ensuring that policy intent translates into improved opportunities and outcomes for children and young people in Wales. Looking forward I want to ensure that family focussed interventions include a strong focus on meeting the specific and distinct needs of children and young people within those families. It is also important that education provides a strong contribution to partnership working within these programmes.

In 2012 I undertook a week of visits to meet and listen to children and young people living in Communities First areas, listening to the adults supporting these children and young people about the issues facing these communities and identifying any good practice with children and young people being undertaken by projects in these areas. In addition I visited two primary schools that were undertaking important work with very disadvantaged families. I was impressed with the enthusiasm and commitment of projects working with children and young people in disadvantaged areas. I saw some examples of practice that clearly demonstrate community based work to promote the rights of children and young people growing up in poverty. The key issue in achieving change appears to be a commitment to develop work that breaks down the barriers between schools and the wider community and involves a strong and positive relationship between Communities First and schools in joint working to support children, young people and their families. The new Cluster arrangements have been put in place since I undertook my visits and I am aware that there is a new outcomes framework which sets out actions for 'learning communities', I will be monitoring the impact of these developments and I am continuing to develop my links with Community First areas.

**2. The respective roles of the Welsh Government, education regional consortia, local authorities and governing bodies in addressing the issue and why there is variation between schools in mitigating the link between poverty and educational outcomes.**

One strong message from the evidence exchange I recently undertook is that national policy and performance drivers focus heavily on attainment without due regard to well-being issues. At the same time it was suggested that at the local authority level that a wider focus on supporting population well-being and integrated working seeks to promote inclusion and well-being work in schools. This in the context of a regional level focus on school improvement leaves schools with competing priorities –despite clear evidence that a focus on pupil well-being supports better

attainment. The current narrow focus on key stage attainment and attendance levels does not necessarily provide a meaningful picture of those schools which are achieving in terms of supporting children in reaching their educational potential in line with article 29 of the UNCRC. The evidence provided to me suggests that the current system of inspection and performance framework is detrimental to schools working with significant cohorts of disadvantaged pupils and those with additional learning needs. The narrow focus of the current system in terms of attendance and attainment targets against minimum thresholds does not take account of the context of providing education to children and young people who often need support with wider well-being issues in order to flourish in school.

I have therefore welcomed the suggestion within the consultation on the future delivery of education services in Wales (the Hill review) that a schools performance should also reflect value added; the context of the school as measured by the proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals (FSM) or with a statement; progress in closing the gap between FSM and non-FSM pupils and levels of pupils and parent satisfaction. Evidence gathered from my meeting with pupil inclusion and well-being leads identified examples of the ways in which local authorities are already using assessment tools, existing data, multi-agency information sharing systems and individual learning and support plans to consider the distance travelled by pupils to ensure that their needs are met and they can reach their educational potential.

Evidence I have gathered through meeting with pupil inclusion and well-being leads also suggests that head teachers of schools in areas of high social deprivation, often excel in providing strong leadership on community focus and the social and emotional needs of pupils and is borne out by my direct experience over the past five years. However the evidence exchange also highlighted the fact that for children from low-income households and with additional learning needs attending schools where they are statistically in the minority this approach is often not adopted. I am clear that the commitment of head teachers and the leadership they offer is critical in ensuring that there is rights based practice in education settings in line with promotion of the rights contained in UNCRC. Without this leadership the Welsh Government's policy aspirations in relation to children's rights, well-being and targets to narrow the attainment gap between pupils from low-income households and their peers cannot be met.

The opportunities for practice exchange offered through regional consortia arrangements must be used to ensure that schools that provide a strong education offer to children and young people from low-income households can support other schools in developing their own effective practice.

**3. Whether Welsh Government policy sufficiently takes forward issues relating to parental engagement in respect of children from low-income households, and whether it addresses the views and experiences of children and young people from such households regarding barriers in this regard.**

The Welsh Government Learning Wales website provides information, guidance and case studies in relation to improvement areas, poverty and well-being and family engagement being included in these sections of the website. However evidence gathered through my recent evidence exchange meeting suggests that at the school level there is a feeling that the Welsh Government policy drive and inspection processes do not place importance on issues such as parental engagement. At the same time contributors to the evidence exchange provided evidence that in some areas initiatives such as the Team Around the Family approach, joint assessments and multi-agency working are operating well and that a clear outcome of such approaches is increased family engagement in the education of their children.

My programme of Community First visits included Glyncoch Communities First who work in partnership with the People and Work Unit and have developed a work stream firmly focused on raising the value of learning and achievement in the community. The community includes some great schools but poor GCSE results, low levels of literacy and high rates of young people not in education, employment or training meaning that the community was high on the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation for education. School Focused Communities Glyncoch is an action-research programme following a cohort of children as they go through secondary education while providing support to them and their families. The project monitors their attendance, behaviour, attainment and family contact with the school. The impact of this project and of wider work in the community to build family and community capacity to support learning is starting to be seen. I heard how some of the most disadvantaged young people have started going to college, truancy among some year groups has dropped by a third and three young people have recently entered university. This

approach involves raising the aspirations of the whole community and clear action on engagement to support parents and carers in becoming involved in their child's education.

I also visited Goetre Primary school in Merthyr Tydfil. The school serves a community where there are high indicators of multiple deprivation, and where a lot of parents are young parents, many of whom have basic skills issues themselves. The school has employed an Education Family Support Officer who is driving forward action on working with families and the community to ensure that children are accessing and benefiting from an education. The decision to create this post is part of the wider ethos of a school that is truly community focussed. The work has a clear focus on promoting a strong and positive relationship between the school, families and the community. The school is a hive of activity that includes practical support as well as work to engage families in education. I have drawn the Committee's attention to practice in this school when responding to the National Attendance and Behaviour Review and I remain convinced of the benefits that posts such as that of Education Family Support Officer can provide. Contributors to my evidence exchange exercise also identified the importance of family engagement. Examples were given through the Restorative Practice approach of work to engage parents, the development of links with adult learning opportunities and in other areas examples of Family Learning approaches were provided. I will compile these practice examples into a paper when more detailed information is provided and will be happy to share this with the Committee if useful.

I have already set out that evidence presented by Estyn in relation to school effectiveness in tackling poverty and disadvantage (2012) suggests that effective schools also place importance on listening to learners and providing them with opportunities to participate fully in the life of the school. I have welcomed the fact that Welsh Government updated and relaunched the Pupil Voice Wales website last year and I hope that schools will use the site as a resource to support their practice. I would like to see robust measures in place to ensure that those responsible for school leadership are provided with clear national direction on the importance of pupil voice.



#### **4. Relevant funding issues, including the effectiveness of the pupil deprivation grant and any anticipated effects of the recently issued guidance for 2013-15**

I am concerned that the appropriate focus on the National Literacy and Numeracy Framework and attainment should be balanced with strong direction on the importance of pupil well-being in supporting achievement and attainment for children and young people from low-income households.

Contributors to my evidence exchange exercise gave examples of the ways in which the pupil deprivation grant has been used flexibly with schools in a cluster area pooling the grant to; for example, fund an additional attendance officer who has been able to engage with families with positive impact. However some contributors reported that the narrow criteria included in the 2013-15 guidance will operate as 'a straight jacket' that will restrict innovation and work on well-being. Evidence was also provided to me suggesting that in the context of rural authorities where small schools may only have a very small number of children who attract the pupil deprivation grant it is very difficult to find a way of applying a very small level of funding in an effective way.

#### **5. The costs associated with education (trips, uniforms, sporting equipment etc) and the effectiveness of the Welsh Government's approach in ensuring that children from low-income households are not disadvantaged in this regard**

Evidence presented to me through my recent evidence exchange exercise suggests that the costs associated with transport (especially in rural areas) continue to act as a barrier to the engagement of children and young people from low income households in after school activities and homework clubs. I was told that practical barriers associated with the costs of equipment and transport continues to impact on children and young people's participation in the school community. Some contributors felt that consideration should be given to using the Pupil Deprivation Grant to address these practical barriers so that children and young people can enjoy the same opportunities as their peers and that this would have a positive impact on engagement and in turn attainment. When I visited Goetre Primary school in Merthyr Tydfil I was told that a uniform recycling scheme was started after the Education Family Support Officer engaged with some families whose children had very low attendance and found that there was an issue with paying for school uniform. Parents were concerned that their children would be stigmatised because they did not have school

uniform. Where schools operate in a community focussed way and work with partners to understand and respond to the practical barriers to children and young people's engagement in the full life of the school positive measures can be put in place that really make a difference.

**6. Issues relevant to free school meals within this context, such as take-up rates, the perceived stigma of claiming free school meals, the use of free school meals as a proxy indicator for child poverty and the impact of Universal Credit.**

Some contributors to my evidence exchange exercise felt that free school meals provide too narrow a measure of deprivation. The impact of the economy on labour market opportunities and wage levels means that over 50 per cent of children living in poverty in Wales<sup>3</sup> have at least one working parent. At the same time the UK Government's welfare reforms will have far-reaching impacts for benefit claimants, particularly non-working families with children and overall, non-working lone parents are one of the groups that will incur the largest income losses.<sup>4</sup> The national benefit cap for out-of-work (working age) households in association with the move towards the Universal Credit regime, are expected to restrict benefits for some 1,500 households in Wales, including 6,000 children.<sup>5</sup> The Free School Lunches and Milk (Universal Credit) (Wales) Order 2013 was issued last month and provides that free school meal entitlement is dependent on a person or their parent being in receipt of universal credit on or after 6 September 2013. I am concerned that low-income working families will continue to be disadvantaged and there is a need to closely monitor the impact of wider benefit changes on those children in families who have restricted benefits as a result.

**7. Views on the Welsh Government's response in taking forward the recommendations of the Children and Young People's Committee of the third Assembly in respect of the 'Child Poverty: Eradication through Education' report.**

The landscape of national policy and local planning in Wales has changed significantly since the publication of the Committee's report in 2008 and there has also been considerable change in the period since the 2011 publication of the follow up inquiry report. Many of the recommendations have been addressed on paper and there is evidence of this in my responses to earlier questions. However the fact remains that in practice the gap in educational outcomes for children and young people from low-income households and their peers remains too wide. What is clear to me is that

this position can only improve where there is a clear focus on improving the experience of education for children and young people from low-income households. There is now a body of evidence to suggest that a focus on pupil well-being including pupil voice as part of a package that considers the holistic needs of the individual child or young person, offers the best approach in supporting pupils from low-income households to realise their right to meet their potential in line with the UNCRC. There are examples of excellent practice in Wales where whole-school approaches and a clear community focus are providing good quality educational opportunities for children and young people from low-income households. As education provision in Wales looks towards a period of on-going reforms it is essential that a focus on proven approaches to supporting pupil well-being are an integral part of reform and are afforded equal status to that given to attainment.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://wales.gov.uk/about/aboutresearch/social/latestresearch/child-poverty-strategy-wales-baseline-indicators/?lang=en>

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.estyn.gov.uk/english/docViewer/259977.9/effective-practice-in-tackling-poverty-and-disadvantage-in-schools-november-2012/?navmap=30,163>,

<sup>3</sup> A. Parekh and P. Kenway, *Monitoring poverty and social exclusion in Wales 2011*, York: JRF ; H. Aldridge, P. Kenway, T. MacInnes and A. Parekh, *Monitoring poverty and social exclusion in Wales 2012*. York: JRF

<sup>4</sup> Welsh Government, (2013) *Analysing the impact of the UK Government's welfare reforms in Wales – Summary of the key findings*, Cardiff: WG