

Senedd Cymru | Welsh Parliament

Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg | Children, Young People and Education Committee

Gwasanaethau i blant sydd wedi bod mewn gofal: archwilio diwygio radical | Services for care experienced children: exploring radical reform

Ymateb gan Cyngor ar Bopeth Cymru | Evidence from Citizens Advice Cymru

Before care: Safely reducing the number of children in the care system

Please outline a maximum of three top priorities for radical reform of services for safely reducing the number of children in the care system.

Priority 1

Integrating income maximisation and social welfare advice into family support programmes to help promote financial stability and security for the household.

Improving financial resilience and well-being is a key aspect of building family resilience. The Covid pandemic and current cost-of-living crisis continue to take their toll on families across Wales. Citizens Advice latest client evidence demonstrates how many people just don't have enough money coming in to live on. Alongside increasingly unaffordable essential services and household bills, many of the contributory factors are longstanding, including an inadequate social security system and low wages.

A recent comprehensive evidence review (undertaken by the Nuffield Foundation) found that, without changing any other factors, reductions in income and other economic shocks increase the numbers of children being subject to neglect and abuse, while the same review found increases in income reduce those figures. Importantly the international evidence base to support this is much stronger now compared to 2016, when a similar review was undertaken by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

The review found within local authority areas in England children in the most deprived decile were around 13 times more likely to be on a Child Protection Plan and over 10 times more likely to be looked after (CLA) than a child in the least deprived decile.

There was however acknowledgement that there is a lack of recent research evidence on the patterns of child abuse and neglect in wealthier families. Existing research also fails to take account of the different demographic characteristics of parents and children, or parents' employment status, and the impact these factors have on how families cope or adapt to financial challenges.

A further recent study by the University of Liverpool reiterated the potential causal link between rising rates of child poverty and an increase in children entering care in England. The study concluded that national anti-poverty strategies are key to tackling adverse trends in children's entry into the care system.

While we believe Wales is in a much stronger policy position than England in relation to tackling poverty, and specifically child poverty, this latest evidence is a timely reminder of the urgent need to

ensure families in crisis are receiving all the support they need to improve their financial security and stability in order to reduce harm to children. Poverty can increase stress for parents, which may become toxic stress, increasing the likelihood of them being unable to care for their children.

We strongly welcome the Welsh Government's recent commitment to refresh their Child Poverty Strategy and the opportunity this provides to refocus actions and provide better coordination and direction for the further implementation of the Strategy, at a time when child poverty is likely to increase and its effects intensify.

The importance of early intervention in improving outcomes for children and young people living in poverty has long been recognised by the Welsh Government, particularly under two of their flagship family support programmes, Flying Start and Families First. The provision of social welfare and income maximisation advice used to be an integral element of the Families First programme. However, several years ago a decision was taken by the Welsh Government to no longer fund this part of the programme, and instead to signpost families in need of this support to advice services outside of Families First. At the time Citizens Advice provided advice to families in need under Families First and outside the programme.

Please see under priority 2 for continued response...

Priority 2

Continuation of response under Priority 1:

As with many of our clients, families referred into the Families First programme will often have complex needs and may be reluctant to engage with support services independently. While receiving social welfare and income maximisation advice is unlikely to resolve all of the problems these families face, it does play its part. The timing of that advice is crucial. Our extensive experience of providing advice shows people often need to be in the right place mentally and emotionally before they are ready to access different types of support/services which they'd benefit from.

The recent evidence review highlights how ensuring families who've experienced economic shocks, or who live in poverty, have a sense of financial stability, improves their chances of being able to provide a stable and secure home for themselves and their children. Supporting people to increase their income from benefits, and better manage their money and/or debts helps to provide that financial security.

We would therefore recommend that the Welsh Government give consideration to fully integrating social welfare and income maximisation advice into Welsh Government family support programmes, particularly Families First, in order that families are able to access a holistic package of support alongside other interventions.

Priority 3

In care: Quality services and support for children in care

Please outline a maximum of three top priorities for radical reform of services for children in care.

Priority 1

No comment

Priority 2

Priority 3

After care: On-going support when young people leave care

Please outline a maximum of three top priorities for radical reform of the on-going support provided when young people leave care.

Priority 1

Integrating financial education, income maximisation and social welfare advice into support programmes for all care leavers to help promote financial stability and security for each young person to better enable them to live independently

Every young person leaving local authority care will have their own needs. Significant variation is likely to exist between individuals in terms of their backgrounds, personal circumstances and individual factors, such as resilience, knowledge and ability to live independently.

Many young people can face a range of challenges when leaving care and making the transition to independent living and adulthood. Some will be financially vulnerable and have additional pressures compared to their peers due to a smaller support network. Poor school experiences, often compounded by changing placements and schools, can result in a lack of qualifications. This may limit opportunities to gain well-paid employment and leave them more likely to be living on a low income. In addition, having to live independently earlier than other young people, combined with a lack of emotional and financial family support, can mean some care leavers may have to shoulder more financial responsibility at an earlier age.

Given these challenges, we believe young people leaving care are a very appropriate group for the Welsh Government's Basic Income Pilot. Citizens Advice was approached to be a delivery partner for the wrap-around support available to participants before the start of the scheme in July 2022. We have established teams of specialist advisers within each of our 6 Single Advice Fund regions. Our advisers are providing both general advice and casework level support for more complicated needs. We are also developing a new set of financial capability tools, aimed specifically at 18-24 year olds, to support the scheme.

Up to the end of December 2022 we have supported 198 young people, out of the 242 who entered the scheme during this period, equivalent to 82%. Our interactions to date have predominantly been via email or telephone. Nearly a quarter (23%) report having a disability or long-term health condition, and nearly 1 in 10 (8%) are people of colour.

These young people have come from all local authority areas. We are also being approached many times by individuals, with an average of 6 contacts per client. This points to a recurring need for a point of contact for support and advice.

Many of our clients seek help on more than one issue, and this has been the case with the young people we've supported on the pilot scheme. We have helped young people with 643 issues in total, more than 3 issues per person on average.

Looking at the types of advice the young people have been helped with to date:

- 29% sought help on Universal Credit (mainly help with an initial claim)

- 65% sought help on other benefits (mainly relating to general benefit entitlements, but also housing benefit and personal independence payment claims)
- over a third (36%) have received help with financial capability (mainly budgeting/managing money and support via tools, apps and calculators)
- 22% sought help on family/relationship issues (mainly relating to social services)
- Other advice areas included housing, charitable support and food banks.

This is a two-year programme and is currently in its early stages. We have made a positive start with our advice support for the scheme and we will continue to develop our service offer for the young people participating in the pilot, learning from our extensive experience of supporting clients more broadly.

We also want to strengthen our working relationship with local authorities across Wales and are keen to engage at a local level on how we can achieve that.

Please see continuation of our response under priority 2..

Priority 2

Continuation of our response under priority 1:

The pilot, and the impact of providing wraparound support to participants, including our advice service, will be subject to evaluation. Our support focus is on ensuring we can be seen as a trusted, long-term point of advice and guidance for the young people on this programme. We hope to remain as a point of contact for them beyond this scheme, if they need further support with any life events.

Whatever the long-term outcomes of the pilot, we believe providing these young people with the financial security of having more money in their pockets, combined with the right advice and guidance, should hopefully enable participants to be better prepared, both financially and emotionally, for adulthood and the reality of living independently.

Priority 3

Anything else

No comment.