

National Assembly for Wales

Children and Young People Committee

EO 03

Inquiry into Educational Outcomes for Children from Low Income Households

Evidence from : Communities and Schools Together (CaST Cymru)

Background:

Communities and Schools Together (CaST) Cymru is a new charity carrying on the work of ContinYou Cymru, part of what was the UK charity ContinYou. ContinYou's work in England has merged with a charity in England and ContinYou no longer exists. CaST Cymru has the same staff and is delivering and developing its work across Wales, supporting schools and communities to make learning opportunities better for all and particularly for those living in disadvantage.

Mrs Sioned Bowen is Chair of Trustees with Mr Martin Fitton as deputy and our first Patron is Baroness Kay Andrews.

We have over 30 years experience and are best known for our work including developing and delivering the support service for out of school hours learning (OSHL) and Community Focused Schools (CFS) funded by the Welsh Government up to the ending of the CFS grant, our Pyramid clubs (supporting quiet, shy, withdrawn children and young people), CanSing, supporting Breakfast Clubs and Cookery and Get on With Science (GOWS) delivered in partnership with Chwarae Teg. Other partnership work includes a JRF research project into 'Poverty and Ethnicity in Wales' and leadership programmes for Councillors.

Our Response:

We welcome and recognise the significant investment from the WG into addressing these issues. However, like many, we believe that more has to be done to improve educational outcomes and life chances for these children and young people and that this cannot be done by schools on their own.

We offer our comments on this consultation:

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

We work with schools and statutory and Third Sector organisations across Wales, including with Communities First. Our view is that whilst WG policy and strategy has and is making some difference there are still many children (and their families and communities) who do not have the same life chances as those from more affluent households and with greater social capacity. In a time of economic challenge we recognise the need to focus scarce resources and recognise the focus on Communities First areas. However, we do not believe that the imposed 'communities' of Communities First are necessarily the best or only way to target resources and support. There are many families outside these areas living in poverty who are 'doubly disadvantaged' by being in the minority, being surrounded by more affluent families and without the infrastructure to support

those living in poverty. We also believe that whilst there is some effective practice in Communities First in relation to working with schools, this appears to be limited and much more could be done to enhance these relationships with the right support. The timescale of the Pupil Deprivation Grant (PDG) Match Fund, which we welcome, did not lend itself to strategically considered true partnership applications between Communities First and schools and we believe that this funding could have been better used with more time for planning and partnership development and support. We are concerned that the skills, expertise, knowledge and understanding of many Third Sector organisations (including ourselves), locally, regionally and nationally, is not being utilised to support the needs of schools and communities. We suggest that there is a much greater role for the Third Sector in addressing educational outcomes and narrowing the gap.

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

We believe that the WG has to have a strategic role and must guide consortia, LEAs and actively encourage the development of true partnership working, recognising the skills and expertise that others bring, including the Third Sector, business and industry. The period of change (with education consortia, changing roles of LEAs, etc) means that there is great instability with many individuals, LEAs, schools, governing bodies and consortia struggling to understand these roles and responsibilities. This is having a significant effect on how schools are able to be part of wider developments within their communities. We have found that many governing bodies understand little about the issues of poverty and disadvantage and how schools can play their part in mitigating these circumstances.

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

It is recognised that parental and family engagement can make a difference to children's learning and educational outcomes. However, for many in disadvantaged communities the level of support needed to fully engage with schools and the capacity to fully engage and support families is considerable and can be costly in time and resource. To be effective this needs people (not only teachers) with the right skills and experience. Under the Community Focused Schools (CFS) grant some schools and LEAs had implemented programmes to support parental/family engagement that were starting to make a difference. Much of this disappeared with the end to the CFS grant. There is some development of such roles using SEG/PDG/PDG Match Fund but much has been lost and there needs to be national and local support available. For example CaST Cymru has started a network (self funded) to support staff in these roles in the south and is aiming to start similar in the north. An excellent example of what can be achieved is Goetre Primary School in Gurnos, Merthyr.

Our belief is that many schools do not fully recognise or feel able to address the significant and entrenched barriers that many children, young people and families face. CaST Cymru has delivered awareness raising and training to schools to help their understanding but this is only available if the school requests this and is able to pay for it since our support service for CFS ended. Families First is providing a range of support across communities, but this is not always fully linked into schools and supporting educational outcomes. It is challenging for schools to be able to be involved in many of

these associated programmes as they simply do not have the capacity and are focusing on ‘literacy and numeracy priorities’ and unable to recognise the wider potential of parent/family/community engagement and partnership. Many schools do not understand how to work with other sectors (including the Third Sector) and many organisations that could be engaged with schools do not understand how to work with them. CaST Cymru has recognised this need and with our expertise and track record has a plan to provide such a service but is currently looking for funding to develop such a service.

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

As already mentioned above, we welcome the PDG and the PDG Match Fund. We also recognise the thinking behind the bringing together of a number of grants, including the Community Focused Schools grant, to provide the School Effectiveness Grant (SEG). However, we do not believe that schools, school clusters and potential partners have an understanding of what can be achieved through the most effective use of the grants. The lack of any national support service and differing levels of expertise, knowledge and support available either through LEAs (who have lost many of the staff with this knowledge) and Consortia (who do not necessarily have the level of expertise and capacity) means that many are not making the best use of the funding and there is likely to be duplication and much ‘re-inventing the wheel’. The removal of the specific CFS grant has meant that many schools no longer see themselves as able to deliver and/or develop their community focus. We believe that there is a need to re-focus on the role of schools in their communities and communities in their schools and have offered information and research to WG to suggest ways to ensure that this element is not lost and is recognised for what it can achieve. This is not always about additional or new resources but by change of culture, ethos and attitudes. (See other relevant information at the end)

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

Families often struggle to find the money to provide the ‘extras’ that many children take for granted. This is likely to increase as the economic situation takes hold and Universal Credit comes in. Having to find enough money for a trip, birthdays and Christmas can send the whole family budget out for a week or month (or more) and the effects of this are not always recognised by schools (see the soon to be published Joseph Rowntree Foundation report on ‘Ethnicity and Poverty in Wales undertaken by CaST Cymru as part of a partnership). We have seen instances of children stigmatised by the way in which these things are recognised (or not) and handled within schools.

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 the need to revise eligibility criteria arising from the introduction of Universal Credit

We believe that many families still do not take up their free school meal (FSM) eligibility because of the perceived or actual stigma associated. We have seen examples where children and young people are still stigmatised within school if they are in receipt of FSM.

The use of FSM as a measure of poverty is seen as flawed and not seen as ideal. However, in the absence of anything else, and using other suggested measures, it would appear that it is 'workable'. However, it is vitally important that schools understand that poverty and the definitions of poverty is much more than FSM. We have found that many schools struggle to understand this. The sessions that we provide for schools help to address this but, as stated previously, we have no funding to promote, develop and provide these sessions on a strategic basis.

7. Views on the WG's response in taking forward the recommendations of the Children and Young People Committee of the Third Assembly in respect of the 'Child Poverty: Eradication through Education Report'

Please see the above comments and those below.

Any other relevant evidence

Community Focused Schools – schools and communities/communities and schools:

In the WG written response to the children and Young People Committee Report – Follow up Inquiry into Child Poverty (March 2011) recommendations 9 and 10 relate to Community Focused Schools:

9 The Committee recommends that the WG should provide comprehensive guidance to make it clear what community focused should offer and clarify how community focused schools can help to tackle the link between disadvantage and achievement.

10 The Committee recommends that the WG works with local authorities to prioritise the development of community focused schools. Local authorities should ensure that CFS strategies are firmly incorporated into child poverty strategies and included in children and Young Peoples Plans.

Whilst the SEG, PDG and PDG Match Fund (Communities First only) do include references to community focus, working with partners and parental/ family engagement, we do not believe that this goes far enough. As already stated above, many schools, LEAs and potential partners do not fully understand the potential of the grants or indeed of being community focused. We believe that there must be WG strategic direction that encourages all schools to develop a community focus, not in isolation but with their communities, that is appropriate for their community and helps to address the educational outcomes for children and their families – and therefore their communities. There has to be a new understanding of what this can and should mean and provide the appropriate level of support to enable all those involved (and not only Communities First) to work together with shared understanding. This is not necessarily about increased or new funding but about culture, ethos and understanding and a 'bending' of current budgets. There is currently no national, strategic support for this work. We believe that CaST Cymru is well placed to further develop its long standing track record in this area by working with the WG, consortium, LEAs, schools and partners including the Third Sector to identify and deliver support nationally. To enable this community approach it will be essential that schools are given the support and capacity to play a full but not necessarily leading role in such community focused provision.

Pam Boyd Chief Executive