

## **National Assembly for Wales**

### **Children and Young People Committee**

**EO 14**

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

**Evidence from : Welsh Local Government Association**

## **INTRODUCTION**

1. The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) represents the 22 local authorities in Wales, and 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 the educational attainment of children from low income households. The WLGA believes that decisions about services should be taken as close point of delivery as possible and that the people and communities using those services should be as engaged 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 National Assembly for Wales inquiry into educational outcomes for children and young people from low income households. The outcomes, wellbeing and educational attainment of all children are of paramount importance to local government in Wales demonstrated by the commitment of local authority leaders to make education their number one priority. The WLGA is committed to working with Welsh Government and local authorities to ensure that educational outcomes for all children and young people continue to improve. To that end, WLGA supports fully the Welsh Government's priority for tackling poverty and improving outcomes for those from low income households. In that context, the WLGA, local authorities and schools are all committed to working together to ensure there are a range of services available in Wales to meet the needs of all children and young people whose circumstances define them as experiencing child poverty.
  
8. There continues nevertheless to be evidence of clear links between poverty and low educational achievement. This is the case not only within Wales, but also across the United Kingdom. The relationship of pupil outcomes to household income, is often indicated by the take up of free school meals (FSM) and lower academic attainment by children from those households, and a link also with the high level of young people who are not in employment, employment and training (NEET). National statistics clearly show that children and young people who are entitled to free school meals do not do as well in formal examinations as those who are not in receipt of free school meals, and this gap widens as the young person moves through the school system. The statistics do show however that there has been progress on reducing that gap over the last 6 years. Nationally only 23% of pupils entitled to free school meals were gaining

5 GCSEs including mathematics and English or Welsh (level 2 inclusive), this compares to the Wales average of 50.5%. If these figures are examined in more depth it can be seen that the four authorities with the highest percentage of pupils entitled to free school meals are also the four local authority areas that have the lowest percentage of pupils achieving level 2 inclusive. Conversely the five local authorities with the lowest levels of free school meal entitlement are also the authorities who have the highest achievement at level 2 inclusive.

9. Free school meals are an important proxy measure of poverty, as identified above, but school meals have an important role to play in ensuring that all children and young people are able to access a filling and nutritious meal on a school day. Children and young people are more likely to engage with learning and have higher levels of concentration if they have a nutritious meal. 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.

10. The *Free School Meals Case Study Report*, by Welsh Government, 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 for 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. Local authorities are working to overcome these problems and many schools for example, already operate cashless systems in order to try and reduce the stigma associated with FSMs.

11. It is clear that there is a strong link between poverty and attainment and there may be a number of reasons why children and young people living in poverty do less well in school. The factors most usually cited and accepted include a comparative lack of physical and other resources, evident through poor housing stock, including overcrowding, mobility problems where public transport is lacking, health problems in children and adults, stigma, bullying, emotional and behavioural difficulties and higher levels of educational need (19.5% of pupils in Wales are known to be eligible for free school meals, 42.1% of pupils attending special schools are eligible for free school meals.) These factors in turn manifest themselves in lower expectations and lack of engagement. Some of these traits and behaviours become cyclical in families and communities and are then difficult to tackle. The WLGA therefore welcomes and endorses the Minister for Education and Skills' priorities of improving standards of numeracy and literacy and thus bringing a focus to bear on the process of reducing the impact of deprivation on educational improvement.
  
12. As part of the work to address these issues, under the Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2009 local authorities, and other public bodies, have to produce a local child poverty strategy setting out how they will meet the needs of disadvantaged families, including educationally. Local authorities identify their priorities for reducing poverty and ensuring that children and young people from low income households have improved educational outcomes through the Single Integrated Plans. These plans bring together partners at a local level to ensure that the community works together to overcome barriers to educational outcomes for some of the most disadvantaged children and young people in Wales.
  
13. In addition the Welsh Government's *Building Resilient Communities: Taking Forward the Tackling Poverty Action Plan* sets out how policies in Wales are being taken forward with the united aim of reducing poverty and the affects of poverty on families, children and young people. *Building Resilient Communities* aims to bring together the policies in Wales for reducing poverty including Communities First. It also sets out targets for taking forward the aim of reducing poverty in Wales. These targets include increasing the number of children and families who will be entitled to Flying Start support, narrowing the gap of attainment levels between learners aged 7 eligible for free school meals and those that are not eligible for free school meals. Local authorities in Wales are working to implement these initiatives as part of the overall strategy for

tackling poverty and the WLGA particularly welcomes the increased investment in Flying Start and sees this as a flagship policy and service at local level for engaging with families at an early stage of the life of the child.

14. Flying Start, and other initiatives such as those being taken forward through the Families First programme are essential to tackling the link between poverty and poor education attainment because there is plenty of research, such as work from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation which shows that schools cannot tackle this issue in isolation. There needs to be an integration of policies and a strong emphasis on a broader range of out-of-school and community based services. It is imperative that closing the attainment gap is not just seen as a school or education issue and the wider focus of *Building Resilient Communities* is welcomed. Parents and the family play a large part in the attainment of their children and it is important that families and services that support families work towards this aim. Policies such as Flying Start and Families First have a vital role in supporting families and promoting the importance of early years education. Working with the family and supporting parents does have a direct affect on children and can help them to overcome some barriers that they face in the education system.

15. Nevertheless, there are examples of good and excellent schools and local authorities, working in deprived communities in Wales and beyond, and a recent report from Ofsted – *'Unseen Children – access and achievement 20 years on'* (a longitudinal study across seven deprived areas in England) asserts that the best schools can make a real difference to educational outcomes. Not surprisingly, the report states that good school leadership is a key factor, and efforts to attract the best leaders and practitioners into deprived areas should be thought through as part of any strategy to support improved outcomes for those from low income households. Best practice examples through local authority regional school improvement arrangements offer Welsh schools an insight into what works well and what practice is transferable between schools. That applies equally in terms of classroom practice and improving relationships and engagement between schools and families.

16. In addition to interventions in schools, access to high-quality childcare has an important role in tackling underachievement and can also enable parents to return to work and/or training and so impact on household income. Returning to work or training can be a big step for some families and local authorities

have a role in providing family support and high quality childcare. All local authorities in Wales provide 10 hours of free childcare to over 3s with a greater entitlement for those in Flying Start areas, and there are examples of local authorities in deprived areas providing over and above the statutory entitlement as they are aware of the positive impact that this has on children from low income households. The Welsh Government's early years and child care plan *Building a Brighter Future* highlights the evidence to show that high quality, accessible, free child care has a positive impact on the outcomes for children from low income households.

17. Young people are often most in danger of repeating the cycle of poverty because they have become disengaged with the education system and have not yet entered the workplace. Young people at this stage in their life can find it difficult to find a place in the community and it becomes increasingly difficult to reengage with the learning community as they become older. Young people can often be strong role models for younger children and as such it is imperative that focus is also placed on delivering services for young people
18. It is vital that young people from all socio-economic groups fulfil their potential, however, it is also important that educational attainment should be seen within the context of both formal and informal attainment. A recent Prince's Trust report *Abandoning Ambitions* identified that a great number of young people who do not achieve 5 A\* to C in GCSE feel like they have failed. Wider enrichment activities within a school, for example sport, leisure and non formal learning should be seen as part of the core provision. This can help to switch learners onto formal education and ensure that the young person has a more rounded set of skills including communication and leadership. Disengagement from education can be a primary factor for poverty and unemployment. A shift in emphasis towards broader educational outcomes would help to keep a young person engaged in education and would be welcomed.
19. Provision of appropriate, high quality services is essential if the link between poverty and low attainment is to be broken however this needs to be set within the context of a challenging financial period for the public sector in Wales. The WLGA have undertaken a funding analysis which shows that the net result of funding pressures and rising demand for services means that Welsh public services could face a revenue funding gap of between £2.5 billion and £4.6 billion by 2025. The School Effectiveness Grant (SEG) and the Pupil Deprivation

Grant (PDG) are the principal grants for taking forward the Welsh Government priorities on improving standards in literacy and numeracy and reducing the impact of poverty on educational attainment. These grants are integral to the funding of schools and this funding is clearly welcomed by local authorities and schools. The WLGA also welcomes the Communities First Pupil Deprivation Grant match fund but notes that the sum of money involved, £1 million per annum for the next two years, may not be sufficient to make a sustainable impact.

20. The WLGA is aware that there are some costs involved in participating in education, for example, school meals, uniforms and trips, which could have an adverse effect on the pupil's attainment levels, due to stigma, bullying or lack of access to out-of-school activities. Local authorities are conscious that these costs can be prohibitive for some families and do try to eliminate these barriers and ensure equality within schools. The local authorities receive grants to supplement the amount they spend from the Revenue Support Grant (RSG) in order to meet the needs of children, young people and families within the education system. Funding streams such as the School Uniform Grant can help to eliminate some of these additional costs. At a local level many schools and youth services do not charge some individuals if they are aware that cost is a prohibitive factor in engaging in an activity. This is often the benefit of local knowledge and engagement of the family with the education setting rather than undergoing a formal assessment in every case. The WLGA agrees that there should be no prohibiting factors for any child or young person to enjoy a full and active school life.

21. The WLGA believes that all children and young people in Wales should be given the opportunity to fulfil their potential. This can be achieved through the provision of support for families to move out of poverty and through support for learners within schools or through informal learning routes. In order for Wales to prosper it is essential that the link between low household income and low attainment is broken.

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