

**The National Assembly for Wales
Children and Young People Committee**



Evidence for its short inquiry into children's budgeting in Wales.

Written response on behalf of the Children's Commissioner for Wales

The Children's Commissioner for Wales is an independent children's rights institution established in line with the Paris Principles. In exercising his functions, the Children's Commissioner for Wales must have regard to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

The United Kingdom government ratified the convention in 1991 and in doing so committed to bringing all domestic legislation and guidance into line with the Convention. The Welsh Assembly Government has adopted the Convention as the basis for all its policy development in relation to children and young people. 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.

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We do not require our submission to be treated as confidential.

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to this important inquiry and we are aware of other submissions, for instance, the comments presented by the Non- Governmental Organisations' Policy group, as well as the written evidence already made publicly available on the National Assembly for Wales' website.

1. To what extent do you think that budget setting and allocating resources for children and young people is transparent at national and/or local level?

In 2008, the Children's Commissioner for Wales, jointly with the other UK Children's Commissioners, reported to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child and made the following comments on children's budgets:

Allocation of resources

18. In 2002, the Committee recommended that to ensure compliance with Article 4, budget analysis be conducted across the UK Government and devolved administrations to show spending on children, identify priorities and allocate resources to the maximum extent available. This recommendation has been inconsistently acted upon and where analysis has been carried out, it has not always been at the instigation of Government (with the exception of Wales).

22. Expenditure on children should be based on a range of variables including need, demography, rurality and economies of scale. The overall aims should be to spend sufficient public money to ensure the best outcomes and to maximise the overall well-being of children and young people. The recent UNICEF report on child well-being in rich countries identifies the strong links between government expenditure on children and overall well-being.³¹ The UK has a lower rate of child well-being than might be expected given its social expenditure.

(<http://www.childcomwales.org.uk/uploads/publications/61.pdf>)

The report acknowledged that in Wales attempts have been made to ensure that budgetary spend on children is more clearly identified and more transparent at a national level than in England.

Whilst we welcome the progress made in attempts to clarify children's budgets in Wales in recent years, the use of non-recurring funding streams often causes more problems than solutions. An example would be the recent one-off release of funding for Short Breaks. The Disabled Children Matter Wales campaign made considerable reference to this issue within their written evidence.

The picture in relation to children's budgeting is less clear at a local authority level. Any increase of funding is widely publicised but any withdrawal of funding often receives very little publicity. Core budgets however, are often less transparent.

Voluntary organisations which provide essential services for children often contact the Children's Commissioner for Wales for support when their funding and therefore the future of their service is under threat. Recently these have included calls from bereavement services, young carer's projects and services for young people with a learning disability.

We are also aware that some Homestart projects have had to cease operating. By enabling positive parenting these projects could have the effect of preventing the need

for more expensive intervention in the future yet it is these preventative services that appear to be at the greatest risk.

It is essential that voluntary organisations have a clear idea of their funding prospects for the future. At present, many have to use a disproportionate amount of their resources merely to ensure their continued existence.

Connected to the difficulties of the third sector is accessibility of information regarding European funding. We have received information which suggests either lack of information or mixed messages being transmitted to parties responsible for delivering services for children and young people. The Wales European Funding Office and Welsh Assembly Government need to ensure coherent communication with their stakeholders because insecurity is a major source of concern for projects of all sizes and across communities in Wales. We would also question how the profile of Welsh Assembly Government's children's policy agenda is raised in the offices of those responsible for administering these funding streams.

Another example of lack of clarity raised with the office of the Children's Commissioner is how monies from outside the Welsh Assembly Government block grant from UK Government are allocated. We refer specifically to 'consequential' funding which results in Wales receiving additional funding due to UK Government increases for purposes in specific areas of policy. Questions have been raised as to whether or not these amounts should be, or are, 'ring-fenced' to target the policy issues in order that there is a mirroring of the UK objectives and rationale behind the increased funding. Additional funding for CAMHS and separately for disabled children were made available and yet the allocations made by Welsh Assembly Government reflected only a small proportion of the funding received. It is right that Welsh Assembly Government are able to set their own priorities but we must question whether there is equality of service for children in Wales compared to their counterparts in England.

2. To what extent do you think children and young people taken into account in budget setting and allocation decisions in policy areas not obviously related to them, e.g. transport, housing, planning?

We disagree with the premise that the policy areas mentioned above are "not obviously related to children". The recent consultation, for example, by the Welsh Assembly Government on their ten year homelessness plan clearly indicates that children are seen within the scope of that plan.

It is also unclear how the views of those who have a responsibility to act as systemic advocates for children are taken into account in all areas of policy relating to children. The submissions both from the NGO Policy Officers' Group and from Disabled Children Matter Wales illustrate this only too well.

3. To what extent do you think that departments within national and local government are joined-up in terms of what they spend on children and young people? Do you have examples where this is or isn't happening?

There are some aspects of services for children and young people which fall into the remit of departments that do not always have sufficient understanding of children's policy areas and, as such, the developments could not be described as "fully coordinated".

The Older People's and Long Term Care Policy team of Welsh Assembly Government administers, for example, the funding stream for Continuing Care. Medical practitioners, however, have great problems in using this funding stream to provide for children and young people with long term care needs. They are forced to apply criteria which were developed for older people since criteria for children have not yet been produced – despite assurances that they would be forthcoming. The same department also has the lead for young carers. Rural stress and planning for the use of open space are other examples.

Perhaps more worrying though is the division in social services between adult services and children's services – which may result in children's needs not being addressed by those delivering services to the adults concerned.

Often, even where there is a clear national policy there is a gap in implementation at local authority level. In terms of children's budgets this is illustrated by the guidance on looked after children in *Towards a Stable Life and a Brighter Future*. This guidance suggests that only in rare cases should children be placed far from their home and family. In practice we are aware that many such placements are made - with a consequent loss in the ability of the home authority to provide proper corporate parenting as well as being at greater cost.

4. Do you think there is enough forward planning about how funding is allocated to deliver policies and programmes for children and young people? Please give examples.

We note that questions have been raised as to how funding processes reflect government priorities and the policy agenda. In an ever changing policy context, the challenge for government at all levels is to align their budget allocation with a long term vision for children and young people's policy.

5. Do you have any examples of cost benefit analysis being undertaken on policies affecting children and young people (i.e. assessing the costs and benefits of the impacts of an intervention or policy)? Is this something you would like to see done more routinely and made more transparent?

We would point to the recent research by Shelter Cymru and Contact a Family Wales (2008)¹ which has shown how successful and cost effective the change of policy around Disabled Facility Grants has been.

We would hope that the Welsh Assembly Government would conduct similar independent research on other policy initiatives for children and young people – perhaps with the theme of how the initiatives contribute to the child poverty agenda.

The proposed Children and Families Measure (Wales) should legislatively underpin the practice of this kind of analysis. We would seek clarification from the Welsh Assembly

¹ http://www.cafamily.org.uk/wales/DFG_report.pdf

Government as to how the legislation will translate into practice which results in a clear systemic and transparent approach.

6. Tackling child poverty is seen as a high political priority in Wales. To what extent do you think budget allocations reflect this high priority? To what extent is budget allocation and actual spend in Wales 'pro-poor'?

We agree with the comments and recommendations expressed in the contribution from the NGO Policy Officers' Group. Currently, it is almost impossible to conclude whether or not budget allocations reflect political priority due to the lack of transparency which leads to gaps in information.

The proposed Children and Families Measure (Wales) introduced by the Welsh Assembly Government places a duty on public authorities to make and demonstrate their contribution towards eradicating child poverty. If they are to do this, one would assume that evidence of child budgeting would be a necessity so that we can examine more robustly how budget allocations reflect political priority.

The proposed Measure has the potential to translate the political priority into positive and practical practice which could make a real difference in relation to realising children's rights and welfare in Wales.

We would suggest that that the Committee ask representatives from the Welsh Assembly Government to clarify the implications of the new statutory duties with regard to child budgeting.

The prioritising of funding to be pro-poor is a complex issue which relies on accurate data and appropriate formulae to be developed. This is not an easy task as there is always a danger of children missing out due to the configuration of services or allocation. Communities First / Next intervention is an example of this complexity. For instance, some rural wards score high in relation to the 2008 Wales index of multiple deprivation for income deprivation or housing deprivation but may score low for access to services deprivation as they are deemed 'urban wards', even though it might not be a fair reflection of the provision available.

7. To what extent do you think children and young people are enabled to participate in budget setting and allocation decisions at a national and/or local level, and do you have any examples of this happening?

We would question to what extent children and young people are involved in budget setting and allocation decisions in areas that do obviously affect them. How, for example, are children involved in budget setting and allocation decisions about their education at a national level?

We need to examine how we can establish mechanisms for participation in budget setting and allocation decisions as well as question how we can involve current structures such as school councils, children and young people's partnerships and youth forums. May need to think about the role of Children and Young People's Partnerships and the single plans and how allocations are made on the back of those and the role children could play in these decisions in future.

The actual involvement of children should be assessed by those involving children and young people in preparing budgets through the use of the National Children and Young People's Participation Standards Self Assessment Pack.

8. What would you like to see change to make it easier to monitor spend on children and young people?

We will be closely scrutinising the content of the proposed Children and Families Measure (Wales) to see whether it leads to the principles of participation, accountability and transparency underpinning any resulting guidance relating to child poverty duties.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Keith Towler". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line that extends to the right.

Keith Towler
Children's Commissioner for Wales.

March 2009