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19th October 2007

Lewis McNaughton
Deputy Committee Clerk, Legislation Office
National Assembly for Wales, Cardiff Bay
CF99 1NA

Re: Consultation – The Proposed Vulnerable Children LCO Committee

Dear Sir,

Gofal Cymru is a leading mental health charity that has been working for over 16 years in Wales to provide support and assistance for people experiencing mental ill health, to enable them to manage their mental health, overcome stigma and live independent and fulfilling lives. We offer a wide range of services, delivered and developed in partnership with local authorities, local health boards and statutory bodies, including: support to people in their own homes in order maintain independence and quality of life; supported housing and rehab services; employment support and work preparation; out of hours and crisis service; carers services; and unique specialist mental health link services, bridging the gap between hospitals and homelessness departments, thus reducing the risk of homelessness amongst mental health service users.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to this consultation. One in ten children have a clinically recognisable mental disorder¹, and many more will experience less severe mental ill-health. Certain groups of children are particularly vulnerable to mental ill-health. These include those living in socio-economic deprivation and those in care, and so we welcome the Government's intention to tackle child poverty and the inequalities experienced by those growing up in care. The ONS 2004 survey of mental health of children and young people found sixteen per cent of children from families with a weekly household income of under £100 experienced mental ill-health, compared to five per cent with a

¹ *Mental Health of children and young people in Great Britain, 2004*, Office for National Statistics

weekly income of more than £600. The committee will probably be aware of the shocking rate of mental ill-health among looked-after children in Wales – half have some form of mental health disorder. If this LCO will result in Measures that will help reduce these figures, then that is very much to be welcomed.

We are pleased to note that the Memorandum on the LCO states that “The LCO is drafted so as to include support to parents who made need help for their mental health”. Across England and Wales, 946,000 children live with a lone parent with a mental disorder, and 1,333,500 live in a two parent household where at least one parent has a mental disorder². We respect the valuable role that many children play in caring for their parents, but also recognise that it may result in them being at greater risk of experiencing mental ill-health themselves. We work with a large number of families each year, and would welcome any steps the Welsh Assembly Government intends to take to help support whole families, taking the needs of both children and parents into account. We would particularly like to see a greater emphasis on earlier access to assessment and treatment, to stop so many families reaching crisis and thereby reduce the numbers of children having to go into care (which, as we have already noted, can greatly increase their chances of experiencing mental ill-health).

We are also pleased that the definitions of children and young people include all those under the age of 24 - transition between CAMHS and adult mental health services, as we’re sure the committee is aware, is in need of much improvement and can result in 16 and 17 year olds receiving particularly inadequate support.

There are, however, other groups of vulnerable children who have not been explicitly mentioned in the LCO or the Memorandum, which we would like to draw the committee’s attention to. There are over 6,000 homeless children in Wales³, who are extremely vulnerable on a number of levels, and who are at greater risk of experiencing mental ill-health. Refugee and asylum seeker children also have very specific needs and we would hope that improvements their wellbeing are also being considered.

We are concerned that one very vulnerable group of children, who are in fact far more likely to experience mental ill-health than those in care, will not benefit from any Measures that may result if this LCO is successful. At least 95% of young people in prison will have at least one mental health problem; 80% will have more than one⁴. We understand that criminal justice is a non-devolved matter, but we would urge the Welsh Assembly Government to do all that it can to ensure high-quality mental health services to children who are, or who have previously been, in contact with the criminal justice system.

² *Mental Health and Child Poverty*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

³ *People and Homes*, Shelter Cymru

⁴ *Mental Health Care in Prisons*, Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health

In conclusion, therefore, we broadly welcome this proposed LCO, and the Welsh Assembly Government's commitment to improve the lives of vulnerable children and to tackle child poverty. We are as yet unclear, however, as to what specific Measures the Welsh Assembly Government intends to bring forward if it gains the proposed competencies. We are obviously keen to see improvements to mental health services for children and young people, but feel that more resources, rather than more legislation, is the key to achieving this. Whilst we would therefore welcome any future legislation that would improve mental health and well-being, we would urge the Welsh Assembly Government to prioritise putting adequate funding in place to implement existing strategies, such as the *National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services in Wales* and *Everybody's Business*.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to respond to this consultation. If you require any further information, or if you would like us to present oral evidence to the committee, please do not hesitate to get in touch with our Policy and Information Officer, Alexandra McMillan, using the contact details below.

Yours sincerely

Ewan Hilton
Executive Director

For further information, please contact: Alexandra McMillan, Policy and Information Officer, Gofal Cymru, e:alexandramcmillan@gofalcymru.org.uk, t:01656 647722, m: 07747 686928.