

Equality and Social Justice Committee

Focused inquiry on the Welsh Government draft Child Poverty Strategy

Consultation response from NSPCC Cymru

There is clear evidence of the relationship between poverty and children's social care involvement¹. As the leading children's safeguarding charity, NSPCC is concerned about the impact of poverty on families, how poverty can make the job of parenting that much harder and the heightened risk to children when parents do not have the resources, they need to meet their children's needs. Our response is focused on objective 4 and the importance of mitigating the impact of poverty on families in order to safeguard children from harm.

Will the draft strategy support the Welsh Government and its partner organisations to maximise their contribution to reducing child poverty within the boundaries of the devolution settlement?

While we welcome the explanation for how the direction of the strategy was developed and clarity around limitations and levers, the introduction does not include enough detail on how the strategy will work towards its objectives. We would like to see more detail on how the specific objectives set for this strategy will be delivered and within what timeframe.

In addition, while we appreciate limitations to Welsh Government's remit because of reserved levers, we would expect to see more focus on what Welsh Government can do to address these, rather than a focus on what it cannot do.

Objective 4 and the importance of mitigating the impact of poverty on families in order to safeguard children from harm.

NSPCC Cymru welcomes the focus on the right to be treated with dignity and respect and the role of services in challenging stigma. But we are disappointed this section makes no reference to the increased risk of child protection involvement when living in poverty.

The objective highlights the pressures of poverty causing *'poor mental wellbeing and mental health'* but does not acknowledge the risk of overload here and how that can impact on a parent's capacity to meet their children's needs. We know from the work of Prof Bywater's and others that there is a *'contributory causal relationship between the economic circumstances of families and child abuse and neglect'*². The authors of the research suggest we should not view poverty necessarily as another factor of abuse, but something that is *'intrinsic to' other factors such as domestic abuse and substance misuse*³. In the recent Children, Young People and Education Committee inquiry into radical reform of services for care experienced young people, the Family Division Liaison Judge for Wales was clear

¹ <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Full-report-relationship-between-poverty-child-abuse-and-neglect.pdf>

² Ibid, p7

³ Ibid, p9

that for “families living in poverty or experiencing economic shocks which are insufficiently mitigated against via welfare support, the risk of children being neglected, harmed or abused is increased”⁴

We are pleased to see the importance of support for families in a non-stigmatising way. This must include the child protection system. The NSPCC has been calling for the development of a poverty informed child protection system, one which recognises how structural drivers, such as poverty and inequality, affect what is going on in a child’s life. The anti-poverty practice guide from BASW notes: ‘Social workers are often unaware of the context in which families in poverty come into contact with children and family services in the first place; desperation for help often leads to a referral. Many times, things have got so bad financially – usually from being rebuffed by administrative procedures for benefits – that parents will approach professionals for help because they are at crisis point...in desperation, contacts or speaks to someone who then contacts children’s social services. Imagine how you would feel if you were this person who, after doing so, has a social worker appear at their door who is not interested in talking about the problem, poverty, that they feel they desperately need support for’⁵. It goes on to note ‘If social workers cannot spend time recognising the strengths and coping strategies of people living in poverty, anti-poverty practice can be highly patronising. Poverty alone is a stigmatising condition, leaving people with heightened feelings of shame. Add to that the stigma and fear of having been referred to, or subject to an investigation by, child protective services, and people are very likely to be on the back foot.’⁶

In a stark finding, the Children, Young People and Education Committee report into radical reform ⁷ noted that poverty was the most commonly cited reason for children to be removed from their parents. ‘Public health researchers at the University of Liverpool have found that in England, between 2015 and 2020, a 1% increase in child poverty was associated with 5 additional children entering care per 100,000.’

Poverty has been described as the “wallpaper of practice: too big to tackle and too familiar to notice”⁸. Reducing poverty is an essential lever in the pursuit of ensuring families can stay together, when it is safe for the child.

We would like the draft Strategy to be amended to include an **acknowledgement of the relationship between child abuse and neglect and poverty**. We suggest the following wording: ‘poverty is a structural harm which can impact on a parent’s capacity to care for their child and Welsh Government efforts to lighten the load for families will work to support the social care system to support families in a non-stigmatising way. This includes support for children’s services to become poverty aware and in particular, upskilling social workers on recognising a family’s context as part of their assessment of need.’

A poverty aware child protection system

We reiterate again the importance of acknowledging the child protection risks of poverty. This priority is rooted in the UNCRC and the rights of the child, which we of course agree with. But work to end

⁴ <https://senedd.wales/media/1okpjizg/cr-ld15849-e.pdf>, p63

⁵ [Layout 1 \(basw.co.uk\)](https://www.basw.co.uk) p14

⁶ Ibid p14

⁷ Op Cit, Radical Reform for care experienced children and young people, p63

⁸ Morris et al: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cfs.12423>

poverty should also be mindful of article 19 concerned with protection from violence, abuse and neglect. Given the clear evidence of the increased risk of child protection involvement when families live with the additional pressures of poverty, it is imperative this is acknowledged, and services are supported to recognise and meet the needs of children and their families in this context.

We want to see a bullet point included in objective 4 which aims to ensure the child protection system is poverty aware, with training for practitioners on the impact of poverty on a parent's capacity to care for their child. NSPCC is piloting training to support children's practitioners. The aim is to help practitioners develop poverty awareness and integrate the context of poverty into assessments and interventions, to promote the wellbeing of children and families and enhance safeguarding practice.

Which indicators should be used to measure progress in addressing child poverty and what specific and measurable targets should be set to assess this?

More detail is needed here on how progress within the strategy will be measured. While it states there will be annual reporting in the Well-being of Wales report, how this will be measured and where responsibility lies isn't clear.

We want to see an action plan with clear measurable outcomes against the objectives of the strategy. This action plan should include milestones for Welsh Government to work towards and provide the opportunity for stakeholders to hold Welsh Government to account on progress. A target of 2035 for reducing poverty for those with protected characteristics and a 'stretching target of 2050' does not provide an opportunity for continuous monitoring and feedback.

The Bywater evidence review noted the lack of individual level data⁹ held on a child, in contact with children's services, and its family's socio-economic circumstances. While data is collected in Wales on gender, age and disability of children receiving care and support. We want to see an additional category on a family's socio-economic circumstances, to better understand the relationship between social care and poverty and to help identify trends.

⁹ Op Cit

https://research.hud.ac.uk/media/assets/document/hhs/RelationshipBetweenPovertyChildAbuseandNeglect_Report.pdf, p17 and p94