

The National Assembly for Wales' Children, Young People and Education Committee (the Committee) was established by the Assembly on 28 June 2016 with the remit '*to examine legislation and hold the Welsh Government to account by scrutinising its expenditure, administration and policy, encompassing (but not restricted to): the education, health and well-being of the children and young people of Wales, including their social care*'.

Consultation questions

Question 1 – Within the remit set out above: what do you consider to be the priorities or issues that the Children, Young People and Education Committee should consider during the Fifth Assembly?

- 1.1 Save the Children believes that the Children, Young People and Education Committee should prioritise work that examines and aims to improve the learning and development outcomes for children living in poverty in the early years, 0-7. It is our view that holding the Welsh Assembly to account for progress on narrowing the attainment gap between poor children and their better-off peers should be a key aim of the Committee.
- 1.2 We are concerned that too many young children are not reaching key development milestones in the early years. There is a clear, persistent gap in outcomes between young children living in poverty and their peers:
 - Just under half of children in the pre-expansion Flying Start programme areas did not reach or exceed key milestones at age 2 years
 - Just under half of children in the pre-expansion Flying Start programme did not reach or exceed key milestones at age 3ⁱ
 - A quarter (24.9%) of children eligible for free school meals did not achieve the expected level of development (the foundation phase indicator) by the end of the Foundation phase in 2015.ⁱⁱ
 - A child who has experienced poverty persistently and has below average language skills scored 35% less on reading tests at age seven and 22% less on comprehension tests at age 11, than a child who has never experienced poverty and has above average language skills.
- 1.3 We are particularly concerned about the gap in outcomes between children living in poverty and their peers for a number of reasons. First, there is a steep income gradient across a whole range of children's outcomes. From an early age children from better off backgrounds score better in tests of cognitive, social and behavioural development. The extent of the income gradient differs across

outcomes. Analysis suggests that cognitive development is more strongly correlated with income and material inequality than other outcomes.ⁱⁱⁱ This has a significant negative impact on children's childhood and early development.

- 1.4 Second the research is also clear that falling behind early, particularly in cognitive development, has a lasting effect on children's outcomes in later childhood, particularly through educational attainment and life chances in adulthood.^{iv}
- 1.5 Third, we are particularly concerned about the gap in early language development. These skills are fundamental to children's wider development and continue to be vital throughout the early years and in later childhood. If children do not learn to understand words, speak, and listen from an early age, they will struggle to learn to read well when they start school. We know children living in poverty are at the greatest risk of falling behind. Strong early learning outcomes, in particular in early language, help children to enjoy learning build relationships and understand the world around them. Essential skills and knowledge grow out of these and provide the foundations for learning. Boosting children's early language skills is critical to narrowing the attainment gap and improving the life chances of our poorest children. We believe the scale, persistence and impact of the early language gap is such that the Government should commit to all children starting school with strong early language skills.
- 1.6 Fourth, we are concerned that not enough progress has been made in reducing the gap in recent years, despite significant action and investment from the Welsh Assembly. Between 2012 to 2015 the gap in outcomes reduced from 16.5% to 13.3% for pupils studying in English who attained the expected level at the end of the Foundation Phase in Language, Literacy and Communication skills, studying in English. For those pupils studying in Welsh, the gap has reduced from 15.9% to 12.1%.^v
- 1.7 Save the Children acknowledges and welcomes the Welsh Government's commitment to improving the life chances and outcomes of all children in Wales in the early years. *Building a Brighter Future* sets out a clear strategy, and there is a welcome acknowledgement of the need to tackle child poverty to make further progress and give all children a fair start. Delivery of this plan is at an early stage. Ahead of the mid-point for this strategy (2013 – 2023) we believe it will be appropriate and timely to consider the extent to which current policy developments are having the desired impact in practice on young children's outcomes, particularly for those children living in poverty.
- 1.8 Our analysis identifies three primary areas where we can make a difference to the outcomes for young children living in poverty:
 - The home learning environment and parental engagement in children's learning at home,

- Access to high quality early years services,
- Supporting families to increase their income and reduce material deprivation.

1.9 These three priority areas are all recognised in *Building a Brighter Future*, and positive commitments have been made. Our concern is, given the persistence of the gap in early outcomes for children living in poverty, whether the commitments will fully address the scale and impact of the issues. We believe there is a strong case for the Committee to prioritise and scrutinise progress, with a particular focus on:

- How the Welsh Government's commitment to introduce a universal approach to parenting^{vi} will address and make progress on supporting parents to create the conditions and adopt the positive behaviours that help their children learn.
- The quality of support available and accessible to families with young children who are living in poverty, and are live outside a Flying Start area. We do not yet have data on the scale of this challenge. Save the Children is currently undertaking a mapping exercise to establish how many children 0-3 living in poverty in Wales are able to access Flying Start.
- The distribution of highly-qualified staff across Wales, in particular whether families with young children living in poverty have access to high-quality services.

Question 2 – From the list of priorities or issues you have identified, what do you consider to be the key areas that should be considered during the next 12 months (please identify up to three areas or issues)? Please outline why these should be considered as key priorities.

We suggest the Committee seeks to inquire on children's early learning outcomes, with a particular focus on children living in poverty. This could include scrutinising annual Building a Brighter Future progress reports and identifying priority policy areas for action to support children living in poverty, with a particular focus on:

- The extent to which young children living in poverty are achieving learning outcomes and development milestones at all stages in the early years, in particular having good early language skills upon starting school. At present, the publically available evidence on early learning is for those children who have access to Flying Start and then all children at age 7 at the end of the Foundation Phase.

- The extent to which all children living in poverty and have access to high quality services to support their learning at home and in settings, with a focus on early education and care settings.
- Priority actions the Welsh Government can take to make further progress on improving the early learning outcomes for children living in poverty.

ⁱ Welsh Government, 2016. *Flying Start, summary statistics 2015-16*. Available at:

<http://gov.wales/statistics-and-research/academic-achievement-free-school-meals/?lang=en>

ⁱⁱ Welsh Government, 2015. Achievement and entitlement to free school meals. Available at:

<http://gov.wales/statistics-and-research/academic-achievement-free-school-meals/?lang=en>

ⁱⁱⁱ Cooper, K and Stewart, K (2013) *Does money affect children's outcomes? A systematic review*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

^{iv} Welsh Government (2015), *Building a Brighter Future: Early years and Childcare Plan – Progress report 2014-15*

^v Welsh Government, 2015. Achievement and entitlement to free school meals. Available at:

<http://gov.wales/statistics-and-research/academic-achievement-free-school-meals/?lang=en>