Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru | National Assembly for Wales
Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg | Children, Young People and Education Committee
Y 1,000 diwrnod cyntaf | First 1,000 Days

FTD 20

Ymateb gan: Achub y Plan
Response from: Save the Children

1.1 A child's early development is vital for their life chances. We are concerned that young children living in poverty in Wales are consistently not meeting developmental milestones. In turn, we are concerned by the persistent gap in early learning outcomes that this creates between the poorest children in Wales and their peers, which continues at each stage of their education.

1.2 Save the Children's focus in Wales is to improve the early learning outcomes of children living in poverty. A variety of factors influence a child's learning outcomes in the earliest years, including the home learning environment and parental engagement in children's learning at home; access to high quality early years services; and family income. We are particularly concerned about the significant adverse impact of poverty on these factors, and thus children's early development.

1.3 These three priority areas are recognised in Building a Brighter Future, the Welsh Government's Early Years Strategy, and positive commitments have been made. Our concern is, given the persistence of the gap in early learning outcomes for children living in poverty, whether the commitments will fully address the scale of the issues for children.

1.4 Delivery of Building a Brighter Future is approaching its midpoint. We believe this initial consultation on the First 1,000 days will provide a strong baseline from which to review later the impact of the Welsh Government's early year's strategy, particularly for those children living in poverty in Wales. We believe there is a need to further clarify the Welsh Government's 'offer' of

support to 0-2 and their families. We hope the inquiry will help to determine this.

1.5 We believe that there are four critical areas for the Committee to consider with regards ensuring all young children get the support they need to meet their early learning milestones. In particular, we are concerned by:

- The impact of poverty on young children's development and outcomes
- The lack of robust data to monitor and evaluate progress in improving young children's outcomes, and the success of policy and interventions
- The extent to which young children in poverty have a good home learning environment and whether approaches to support parents to create positive home learning environments are working' for young children
- The availability of high quality support for families with young children living in poverty.

1.6 We are also concerned that, following the announcement that the Welsh Government is not going to meet its target to eradicate child poverty by 2020, we do not have a clear picture of how the Government is going to measure progress on reducing child poverty. Given the significant adverse impact of poverty on children's early development, we believe that the early years should be a priority focus for the Welsh Government

2. Children's early learning development

2.1 The learning journey begins from birth and is influenced before that. Development starts in the womb, and studies have found that babies start to learn words in the womb. Babies are born ready to learn. They are naturally curious and learning about the world around them. The learning capabilities of humans continue for the rest of their lives but not at the intensity that is demonstrated in the preschool years. Children develop quickly during these years. Growth of mental and physical abilities progress at an astounding rate and a very high proportion of learning takes place from birth to age six.

2.2 Poverty has a significant and direct impact on children's early learning. There is a steep income gradient across a range of children's outcomes; cognitive development is more strongly correlated with income than other outcomes. This link is clear from early childhood through to adulthood . Poverty has been found to affect children's learning primarily through two routes - the stress and anxiety caused by low income and parents' ability to invest in goods and services that further child development Reducing poverty and its impact is therefore critical to ensuring all young children have the best start and must remain at the heart of efforts to support our youngest children. We urge the Committee to assess how well current approaches are addressing this and supporting our poorest children.

3. Understanding progress

3.1 Save the Children is concerned by the lack of data to monitor progress in the earliest years, particularly in relation to monitoring progress of children living in poverty. Tracking young children's progress across the country is important to enable us to understand the impact of services and policy; to analyse trends for different populations of children and; allow policy and service developments to be based on levels of need, identify where we're making progress and where the gaps are.

3.2 The best available data is from the Flying Start programme. The data we have on children's and parents outcomes presents a mixed picture:

- In 2015-16, 53% of children in Flying Start met or exceeded milestones for their age. A decrease of 4% from 2013-14 .

- Data on improvements to parental confidence and the home learning environment as a result of Flying Start report that there has been improvement on par with non-Flying Start parent's scores, who live in a comparable area .

It is difficult to judge the extent to which Flying Start data represents an improvement, as we do not have baseline data on children or parent's outcomes before the programme began. Developmental comparisons

between Flying Start and non-Flying Start children is not currently possible due to the way this data is recorded. As data begins to become available through the Healthy Child Wales Programme (HCWP), as part of the Early Years Development Assessment Framework (EYDAF), we will begin to gather a clearer picture of children's outcomes. We warmly welcome initiatives such as EYDAF and HWP that will help inform judgements on the difference our interventions are having.

3.3 A lesson learned from Flying Start has been the importance of knowing our start point, so we can measure distance travelled and the impact of our programmes. Ahead of any new initiatives being developed, Save the Children recommends that the Welsh Government ensures they gather baseline data to be able to judge the improvement in outcomes from intervention. It will also help drive continuous quality improvement, to ensure we are raising standards in the quality of early year's services and the impact they have for children and parents.

4. The home learning environment and parental engagement in children's learning at home

4.1 The varying environments, including the home, wider family, school, and community, in which children grow up shape their development. Children's well-being and developmental outcomes are consistently linked to the quality of their environments and the connections between them. It is well established in research that the quality of the home learning environment has a significant, if not the most, impact on children's cognitive and social behavioural outcomes. The home learning environment is made up of the engagement of parents in their child's early learning and experiences, opportunities and resources in the home.

4.2 There is no fixed recipe for creating a positive home learning environment but studies have tried to identify the key ingredients that impact positively on children's learning and development outcomes. The strength of the home learning environment is based on the quality of

parental engagement, by that we mean the quality of parent-child interactions, and the objects and experiences in it. Parental engagement makes a difference to children's enjoyment of learning and the way they view the world. Parenting is one of the most important drivers of social inequalities in cognitive development before school. Waldfogel and Washbrook have estimated that parenting behaviours that include maternal sensitivity, shared book reading, out-of-home activities and parent management behaviours explain approximately 40% of the income-related gaps in cognitive outcomes for children at age four.

4.3 Whilst there is extensive research aimed at understanding the key elements that make up a good quality home learning environment, much less is known about how to intervene to support parents to develop and maintain a good quality home learning environment. The Welsh Government has an important role to play in contributing to this emerging evidence base, and developing a robust evidence base on the outcomes of interventions used in Wales designed to improve the home learning environment.

4.4 Flying Start provides support to parents to create a home environment that encourages young children's development and learning . The National Evaluation of Flying Start (2013) outlined the impact of parenting programmes on parental confidence. It found very little difference between parents in Flying Start areas and those in a matched comparison group. The report infers that Flying Start parents may have started from a lower base that the non-Flying Start parents in the comparison group. Therefore it could be suggested that the Flying Start support services have a positive impact on families' ability to create a good home learning environment.

4.5 Families living outside Flying Start areas may be able to access parenting support through health visitors and Families First, and will also have access to resources such as through the Parenting: Give it Time campaign. There is some evidence on the impact of these parenting support programmes and resources for a broader age range, such as within Families

First evaluation reports and the National Survey for Wales . However, we are not aware of any publically available evidence on the specific impact of these on the home learning environment for the youngest children.

4.6 As the Welsh Government further develops their approach to parenting, it will be important that the home learning environment features strongly. Equally, it will be important to ensure that we respond to the available evidence on what works and robustly monitor the impact of our activities, including outcomes for children and the reach of each initiative.

5. Access to high quality early years services

5.1 It's not just the direct relationship between a parent or carer and a child that supports a child's development. High quality services and support also play a vital role. The role that early year's staff can play in supporting young children outside the home and supporting parents to create supportive environments for learning at home is critical. We believe there are key services and approaches that the Committee should consider as part of their inquiry and we discuss these in this section.

5.2 Flying Start is the flagship programme working with families and children living in deprived communities. Evidence shows that integrated early years settings with highly qualified staff are particularly beneficial to children's development . However, Flying Start does not reach all children and families living in poverty. An ad-hoc statistical request , published on November 14th 2016, shows that 56% of children living in income deprivation in Wales live outside Flying Start areas. This raises significant questions about the scale of the current programme. We welcome the recent statement from the Cabinet Secretary for Children and Communities that the Welsh Government is considering how Flying Start can be developed to increase its reach. Save the Children is currently conducting an analysis to produce data at a lower super output area and local authority level, which we hope will contribute to this development.

5.3 At present, we only have a partial picture of the availability of early years' childcare provision, including child-minders and day nurseries, outside Flying Start areas. Evidence on younger children is not readily available at this time. However, we do know that of those parents with children 0-14, 49% of parents use childcare in some form to work, study or train. Almost four fifths (79%) of these use unpaid family or friends to care for their children. The high level of informal care in Wales would suggest that affordability and accessibility to formal childcare are likely to be significant issues for families with young children on low incomes. We believe it is critical that all 2 year olds, particurly those living in poverty, have access to high quality early education and care. We believe this should be an important consideration for the Welsh Government as the future of Flying Start is considered.

5.4 The Welsh Government clearly recognises the early year's workforce as important in driving up the quality of provision in Wales, as both Flying Start guidance and Building a Brighter Future makes clear. However, we have only a partial picture of the workforce in Wales. In 2014, the Care Council for Wales commissioned an online survey of the Early

Years, Childcare and Play workforce. Findings from the survey tell us that 57% of staff are qualified at level 3, 18% at level 4 or above, half of settings have at least one graduate staff member, however for the purposes of this survey this could be in any topic. What is not clear from this data is which children and at what age these professionals are working with. We believe there is a strong case for examining the distribution of highly-qualified staff across Wales, in particular whether families with young children living in poverty, particularly those outside Flying Start services, have access to high quality services. The forthcoming Early years and Childcare workforce plan, expected in Spring 2017, provides an important opportunity to drive up the quality of early years services.

5.5 We warmly welcome the statement by the Cabinet Secretary to develop a Children's Zone model in Wales. Save the Children has developed Children's Communities in the UK, based on international learning from Children's Zones. Children's Communities are innovative, whole-place efforts to tackle the cycle of generational poverty by improving, simultaneously, a wide-range of children's outcomes. They begin to work in children's earliest years; support children as they get older across their home, school and community lives; connect services and programmes so they build on one another; unlock the power of local assets and informal networks; and link different phases of childhood. This model of working has significant potential to bring together services to deliver shared outcomes model in bringing together services to provide an integrated local support system for children which is holistic and sustained.

6. Recommendations

Save the Children recommends that key areas for focus for the Committee should include:

6.1 The significant adverse impact of poverty on children's early development. We believe there is a need to further clarify the Welsh Government's 'offer' of support to 0-2 and their families. We hope the inquiry will help to determine this.

6.2 Delivery of Building a Brighter Future is approaching its midpoint. We believe this initial consultation on the First 1,000 days will provide a strong baseline from which to review later the impact of the Welsh Government's early year's strategy, particularly for those children living in poverty in Wales.

6.3 The Early Years and Childcare workforce plan is due Spring 2017. This plan is a significant opportunity to drive up quality across all early years services, and to ensure that those children and families experiencing poverty are able to access high quality support.

6.4 As the Welsh Government further develops its approach to supporting parents, it will be important that the home learning environment features

strongly in any new initiative. Equally, it will be important to ensure that we respond to the available evidence on what works and robustly monitor the impact of our activities, including outcomes for children and the reach of each initiative.