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Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru
Welsh Assembly Government

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Welsh Assembly Government response to the Children and Young People Committee's report on their inquiry into 'Parenting in Wales, and the delivery of the Parenting Action Plan'.

Dear Helen Mary,

Executive Summary

The Parenting Action Plan was published in December 2005. The Plan sought to ensure that parents (mothers, fathers and carers) in Wales got the advice and support they need, by setting out what the Welsh Assembly Government intended to do for parents up to March 2008.

The Action Plan aimed to:

- Raise the profile of parenting among policy makers and those who provide services in Wales;
- Further the development of policies and services that support mothers, fathers and carers;
- Link with other policies and activities which are relevant to parenting and,
- Identify key actions to be taken by the Welsh Assembly Government to support parenting in Wales.

The Parenting Action Plan contained 10 action points, and was broadly welcomed when it was published. The Parenting Action Plan has had a positive impact and has helped to raise the profile of parenting education and support.

Support to parents is embedded across a number of portfolios and parenting is being mainstreamed across a range of policies and programmes. The Parenting Action Plan has been a catalyst for this.

The Proposed Children and Families (Wales) Measure signifies our commitment to support to parents through a package of arrangements. In particular the implementation of local Integrated Family Support Teams (IFST) to identify and provide earlier support to vulnerable children and families to reduce risk and improve the child's welfare.

Whilst I am pleased with the impact the Parenting Action Plan has had, I accept that not all action points have been fully achieved. I therefore welcome the Children and Young People's Committee's report and its recommendations.

Detailed Responses to the report's recommendations are set out below:

RECOMMENDATION 1

The Committee recommends:

The Welsh Assembly Government should appoint a "parenting champion" to:

- raise the profile of parenting;
- ensure stronger leadership and better co-ordination across government departments;
- eradicate stigma associated with parents asking for parenting support and advice; and,
- develop a recognised "National Parenting Brand" for all activities undertaken to support parents, including a national bilingual helpline for parents, a free standing, national website with parenting advice for parents run in partnership with voluntary sector organisations, and a positive parenting information campaign. NHS direct provides a model for such branding.

Response: Accept in Principle

I accept this recommendation in principle – to raise the profile of parenting in Wales and fully support the benefits that positive parenting can have upon children's lives. However, I am keen to implement recommendations and practices that can be measured and milestones that can have a direct impact on making a difference and would want to discuss with the Committee and key stakeholders how we could reflect this in the 'championing' of parents. I am particularly keen to raise the profile of parenting with the hardest to reach parents living in difficult circumstances with multiple and complex needs and to apply resources to help parenting especially through difficult circumstances.

The Assembly Government agree with the need to raise the profile of parenting and have established better working relationships within the Assembly Government and with external stakeholders. In our guidance documents, 'Stronger Partnerships for Better Outcomes' (August 2006) and 'Shared Planning for Better Outcomes' (September 2007) we emphasised the importance of participation by parents and carers in local Children and Young People's Partnerships and in the preparation of their Children and Young People's Plans (CYPPs). We will continue to gather good practice as well as giving individual feedback to Partnerships, working with the Partnership Support Unit to identify this good practice and disseminate it more widely.

Government departments are working closely together to involve parents in a number of key policy areas such as Community Focussed Schools, and in developing the Public Health Framework with Public Health and Health Professions to address challenges to improve public health as it impacts on parenting. A further exercise will be undertaken to identify each department and policy area that has a portfolio connection to parents. And we will continue to deliver a positive parenting information campaign.

I support the recommendation to develop a “National Parenting Brand” and I will be seeking ways in which this could be developed and promoted across all internal and external documentation.

Financial Implications: None. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

RECOMMENDATION 2

The Committee recommends:

2.1 The Welsh Assembly Government should say whether there are any outstanding actions from the Parenting Action Plan that it no longer intends to take forward, and give reasons why they will not be taken forward.

2.2 For those actions the Welsh Assembly Government does intend to take forward, from the original Parenting Action Plan, the Welsh Assembly Government should set out clear timescales for their delivery. These should, in particular, include:

- A national, confidential, 24-hour, well-publicised, positively promoted, free, Bilingual parenting telephone helpline, developed in partnership with voluntary organisations. This should provide a confidential service. It should be able to provide parents with information about parenting services in their local area and should, at a parent’s request, be able to refer parents on to a particular service. The bilingual helpline should be branded with the National Parenting brand.
- Distributing parenting booklets developed through the Parenting Action Plan (including ‘From Breakfast to bedtime’ ‘Over the top behaviour in the under tens’ and ‘Help at Hand’) through the ante-natal process, and at a child’s first day at school. Booklets should be branded with the National Parenting brand.
- A dedicated, stand-alone website, which is not part of the Welsh Assembly Government’s own website, with information on parenting skills for parents. This website should contain the bilingual parenting helpline’s number. It should contain information on local parenting services. It should contain simple signposting, without a requirement that users have to go through multiple pages to get to information. It should be branded with the National Parenting brand.

Response: Accept

I accept this recommendation.

Of the ten actions identified in the Parenting Action Plan seven were fully achieved, two were partially achieved and one was not achieved.

Action point 2 – We will develop and distribute a series of booklets for all new parents.

This objective has been achieved. As detailed in evidence to committee three booklets have been published in the ‘Raising Children Confidently’ series. ‘Breakfast to Bedtime’ and ‘Help at Hand’ continue to be distributed to new parents, approximately four to six weeks after birth, by their health visitors. The third booklet, ‘Over the Top Behaviour in the under-10’s’, is aimed at parents of children between the ages of 6 and 10 years, and is distributed via schools to parents of all Year 1 pupils. It will be distributed for a third year during 2009. Copies of these booklets are also available from the Family Information Services in each local authority area, and have been sent to pupil referral units, as well as to Flying Start and other parent-focused projects.

A major reprint last year means that booklets are available to all new parents for the next two years, during which recipients and the professionals involved will be consulted over their value with a view to issuing them further.

Action point 3 – We will set up a working group to consider the Beth Johnson report on grandparents and propose an outline programme of action to be built into the third year of the Parenting Action Plan and linked with Phase Two of the Strategy for Older People.

This objective has been partly achieved - On grandparenting, there is still some work to be done. There is now an opportunity in the Children and Young Persons Act 2008 that could provide a framework for care undertaken by family and friends. Gwenda Thomas is taking that forward. In the guidance on intergenerational approaches, we recognise the role played by grandparents to strengthen the family. This work will continue to be taken forward, with recognition of the role of Grandparents in supporting parents included in guidance on the role of intergenerational approaches in strengthening the family which are being developed and which it is planned to issue in December 2009.

Action point 10 – We will undertake further development of Parentsnet to ensure its suitability for all parents, including those who are less well educated or who are not so well informed.

This objective has been partly achieved - information for parents is provided on the Education pages of the Welsh Assembly Government website, previous content relevant to parents has been rewritten and new content added. We will continue to use the most appropriate communications methods including websites to communicate with parents and prospective parents.

Action point 1 – We will develop a national bilingual helpline for parents in Wales.

This action has not been achieved. At the time of launching the action plan, we were tied into the UK Government delivery of Parentline Plus. Parentline Plus continues to take calls from Wales and my officials are currently in discussion with officials in DCST to find ways of improving access for Welsh speakers to the existing service.

Financial Implications:

Action point 1 – Estimated recurrent annual costs of £400k plus an additional one off £135k for start up costs.

There are no financial implications for other actions identified. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

RECOMMENDATION 3

The Committee recommends:

3.1 The Welsh Assembly Government should produce an overarching Parenting Strategy and a refreshed Parenting Action Plan.

3.2 The refreshed Parenting Action Plan should incorporate the outstanding actions, still to be completed in the Parenting Action Plan (see Recommendation 2).

3.3 The Strategy, and refreshed Action Plan, should also take into account new policies to draw parenting work together.

3.4 The refreshed Action Plan should also set out specific actions to provide support to fathers; grandparents; parents of older children/teenagers; disabled parents; parents of children with disabilities; parents and partners of parents in prison and custody; young parents; parents involved with substance misuse; and, parents from black and minority ethnic communities. It should also include foster carers as appropriate.

Response: Accept in Principle

I accept this recommendation in principle. I recognise the advantage of providing an overarching strategy and we will look to develop a new Parenting Strategy for Wales. However I do not think that a refreshed action plan can address all the aspects of parenting and support that we would wish to convey.

The outstanding actions will be considered adjacent to the development of the strategy and the Welsh Assembly Government will continue to provide support as is required throughout Wales in accordance with the needs identified at local level. The Parenting Strategy will take into account new policies and draw parenting work together.

The Parenting Strategy will take into account the diverse needs of all parents including, those listed in recommendation 3.4. We will continue to work with other Assembly Government departments to achieve the best possible parenting strategy which meets the needs of all groups, as detailed.

Financial Implications: Cost of delivering a new parenting strategy - will have to be considered in discussions with cabinet colleagues.

RECOMMENDATION 4

The Committee recommends:

The Welsh Assembly Government should ensure that the overarching Parenting Strategy and refreshed Parenting Action Plan are fully and appropriately resourced, with a clear identification of the sources of funding for action points' delivery.

Response: Accept in Principle

I accept this recommendation in principle. The action plan and many of the deliverables were via programmes that we were funding. We need to take note of the fact that a grant of £27 million is being distributed to our children and young people's partnerships for Flying Start; of this, £1.7 million is for the parenting programme of Flying Start. Over £200 million of Cymorth funding has gone to local authorities, £17 million of which was spent in 2007-08 on family support across Wales under the key theme family support. We have also supported a number of projects, such as Incredible Years Wales and the evaluation by Bangor, Cardiff and Warwick universities of the effectiveness of the parenting programmes, with grant funding of more than £266,000.

I welcome the opportunity to develop a Parenting Strategy which will provide a far greater opportunity to consider the wide ranging issues affecting parents taking into account the diverse needs of all parents. The strategy will deliver the view of the Welsh Assembly Government and continue to promote positive parenting but will go further to consider; support for parents; support for parenthood; and wider family support.

The aim of the Parenting Strategy will be to promote positive parenting which has an impact at every stage in a child's life, to help create a safe and valued position in the family.

Financial Implications: Cost of delivering a new parenting strategy - will have to be considered in discussions with cabinet colleagues.

RECOMMENDATION 5

The Committee recommends:

The Welsh Assembly Government should identify the overall level of expenditure on parenting support and ensure there is greater transparency and clarity about spend across departments at national and local level as part of the yearly budget setting and allocating process.

Response: Accept in Principle

I accept this recommendation in principle. I identified an opportunity to pull together the strands of funding in the Parenting Action Plan and the programmes that have emanated from it over the past three years, during my evidence session to the Committee. Attached at Annex 1 is the profile of spend for the last 3 years.

Financial Implications: None. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets

RECOMMENDATION 6

The Committee recommend that:

The Welsh Assembly Government should conduct a major public information and education campaign required to promote positive parenting and non-violence towards children to the wider population. This should signpost parents to information on practical support services for parents in their local area. This should be branded with the Parenting Champion's brand. It should also clearly publicise the bilingual telephone helpline.

Response: Accept in principle

I accept this recommendation in principle. The Welsh Assembly Government has sought to promote positive parenting through our Parenting Action Plan and by supporting the Children are Unbeatable (CAU) Alliance in Wales. We remain totally committed to the aims of the Children are Unbeatable campaign to give children and young people the same protection in law as adults, and have recently signed up to the following statement:

We remain committed to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child's call for a global ban on physical punishment which will:

- *fulfil children's human rights*
- *reduce violence against children*
- *improve the effectiveness of child protection*
- *provide a foundation for promotion of positive discipline that works*

We have a long-standing policy of opposition to corporal punishment and promote positive, non-violent forms of discipline. We accept the UN Committee's recommendation that the 'reasonable punishment' defence ought to be removed, so that children and young people can enjoy the same level of protection in law as adults do.

The Childcare Act 2006 places a duty on local authorities to provide information to the parents of children and young people aged 0-19 on childcare and other services to support them in their parenting role. The Family Information Services (FIS) provide accessible, impartial information and guidance to parents and families. FIS provide information to parents who might otherwise find it difficult to access the support they need, including linking with partners to increase take up from disadvantaged and low income families. This includes those who may be socially excluded, including BME communities, those where English is not the first language, parents of children with disabilities, refugees, asylum seekers, families with disabled or mentally ill parents and travelers. Information and support is provided to all who need it including fathers as well as mothers and to carer's as well as natural parents.

Financial Implications: None. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

RECOMMENDATION 7

The Committee recommend that:

7.1 Following a national campaign to raise awareness with parents and carers about the information available to them through Family Information Services across Wales, the Welsh Assembly Government should monitor awareness of Family Information Services amongst the public of Wales.

7.2 The Welsh Assembly Government should also enable Family Information Services to be branded with the Parenting Champion's brand.

Response: Accept

I accept this recommendation in principle. A Marketing campaign is currently underway and we are in continuous liaison with the Marketing team and Family Information Services Coordinators. This includes the development of national Family Information Services telephone helpline.

We will be able to monitor the awareness of the Family Information Service via quarterly network meetings where feedback will be sought.

If agreed we would enable the Family information services and its promotion material to be branded with the National Parenting Brand.

Financial Implications: None. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

RECOMMENDATION 8

The Committee recommends:

The Welsh Assembly Government should provide clear, statutory guidance, giving direction to local authorities and schools about involving parents in schools, taking account of many parents' daytime working patterns.

Response: Accept in principle

While the Assembly Government strongly support increased levels of parental involvement in schools we feel that there are already statutory and other guidance to assist in accomplishing this objective including guidance on strategies for engaging parents. Estyn recently reported on parental involvement in primary schools. In their report (published in May 2009), they found that the single most important driver for ensuring effective parental involvement is the enthusiasm of the head teacher. The effective head teacher strengthens the links between parents and schools and supports innovative and varied ways of helping parents to understand the curriculum and involving them in promoting and supporting improved standards of achievement. Further, Estyn found that in almost all the schools visited, most parents report that they do not like to belong to committees or attend formal meetings but are willing and do help with practical tasks.

Parental engagement is key to School Effectiveness. The aim of the School Effectiveness Framework is to improve educational experiences and life-chances for all children and young people. This will be done by improving on best performance, and narrowing the gap between those schools that are the most effective in adding value to the outcomes for their children and young people and those that are less effective. Involvement of parents/carers is integral to this process. Parents should be involved in collaboration in improving children and young peoples

learning and involved in decision making on policy and strategic direction of schools. Schools have a particular challenge in engaging with harder to reach groups.

School Governors already have statutory responsibilities for including parents on their governing boards and preparing annual parent reports and meetings. Many governing bodies go beyond their statutory responsibilities. They have arrangements in place by which parents are informed, consulted and involved in the work of the school. Most of these arrangements are discharged by the head teacher, as part of the day-to-day management of the school. It is the responsibility of the governing body to review with the head teacher how effectively these promote good school/parent relations.

We believe that the most effective way to proceed is by building on existing Assembly Government strategies

1. As part of the School Effectiveness Framework, DCELLS in conjunction with ADEW and Governors Wales will provide guidance to schools and local authorities to encourage the development of systems to involve parents in decision making and strategic coordination of services
2. As part of Community Focused Schools and Better Schools Funds innovative grant programmes, DCELLS will develop and disseminate models and practices of effective parental involvement such as class meetings, action/interest groups, parent forums and parent councils
3. As part of the RAISE programme in 2009-10, some groups of schools will be developing and disseminating good practice in engaging with parents more effectively in socio-economically disadvantaged areas

Financial Implications: None – we will continue to build on existing strategies funded within existing programme budgets.

RECOMMENDATION 9

The Committee recommends:

The Welsh Assembly Government should commission long-term, qualitative studies about a range of parenting programmes. It should use the same criteria to evaluate and compare parenting programmes. In particular, it should put resources into evaluating Home-Start projects in Wales.

Response: Accept in principle

I accept this recommendation in principle. The Assembly Government continue to provide funding for research and evaluation of parenting programmes, recognising the need for a sound evidence base which can inform future development. As provided in my evidence to the Committee this includes:

- *Incredible Years Wales* - receiving £100,000 over three years to evaluate a new intervention for parents of infants and toddlers from birth to 36 months that promotes positive parenting and reduces the risk of children developing behavioural and emotional problems including conduct disorder.
- *Family Links* - £100,000 over 3 years towards the cost of evaluating the Family Links Parent Nurturing Programme. This is a significant and ground breaking evaluation which has been commissioned in conjunction with four local authority areas (Cardiff, Newport Torfaen and Caerphilly) through their Children and Young People's Partnerships. The evaluation evidence will inform a decision whether this programme, currently being run in these local authority areas, can be included among the Flying Start approved programmes.

- *Cardiff University* - £136,021 has been awarded to Cardiff University over 3 years to extend the research being carried out by Dr Gordon Harold into the effects of inter-parental conflict on children. This research will assess the efficacy of a parent-education programme with a particular focus on the impact of family relationships on a child's emotional and behavioural wellbeing during the transition stages from primary to secondary school. Research evidence will describe the link between children's experiences at home and their long-term emotional, behavioural and academic development. It aims to demonstrate the impact of the family environment on a child's well-being and academic achievement, with a view to informing the development of policy and parent support programmes.
- *IPSOS MORI & SQW* - In addition, we are now in the second year of a long-term, qualitative evaluation of Cymorth and Flying Start by a consortium lead by IPSOS MORI and SQW. One of the themes of the study in 2008-09 is the delivery of parenting programmes within Cymorth and Flying Start. This Thematic study of Flying Start and Cymorth parenting programmes is due in the summer 2009.

Each Local Authority is also required to commit 2% of Cymorth funding to evaluation, which will include the evaluation of parenting programmes.

Financial Implications: None – we will continue to build on existing strategies funded within existing programme budgets.

RECOMMENDATION 10

The Committee recommend that:

The Welsh Assembly Government should explore strengthening arrangements for sharing good practice across Wales and identifying and sharing good practice from international examples.

Response: Accept

I accept this recommendation. Throughout the Committee's findings and summary are examples of good practice; I agree that these examples should be shared across Wales. We will utilise the services that the Family Information Services provide to continue to highlight these successes. In the local development of the Parenting Strategy my Department will identify and review national and international examples of good practice being applied in other parts of the world.

Financial Implications: None – we will continue to build on existing strategies funded within existing programme budgets.

RECOMMENDATION 11

The Committee recommends:

The Welsh Assembly Government should make a clear statement that, in determining whether to breach confidentiality to protect the child or other children from a risk of serious harm, professionals should set aside preconceptions based on parents' economic or social backgrounds and make decisions on a case by case basis.

Response: Accept in principle

As the Committee has recognised, guidance on issues around confidentiality in cases of child protection is broadly set out in Safeguarding Children: Working Together Under the Children

Act 2004. It is essential that people, who have concerns about the welfare of a child, and particularly where there might be concerns about possible abuse or neglect, feel that they have sufficient confidence in the statutory authorities to make their views known. The Assembly Government recognises that in some instances a failure to share information, and at a very early stage, may have serious implications for the welfare of a child. The law permits the disclosure of confidential information if it is necessary to safeguard a child or children in the public interest, therefore the public interest in child protection may override the public interest in maintaining confidentiality. The Assembly Government has put in place through the Children Act 2004 arrangements and structures that strengthen inter-agency working and promote co-operation with a view to improving the well being of children. An important facet of that is the effective flow of information to ensure that all agencies can work together. The effectiveness of these arrangements are paramount to the well-being of the child, and in ensuring that the child's best interests are at the heart of any decisions that are made about their welfare, and these must not be compromised.

The Assembly Government is committed to giving children and young people the best possible start in life by promoting their welfare and protecting them from abuse and neglect. However, responsibility for protecting children must go wider than the statutory agencies and to society as a whole and the public have a pivotal role to play. Through the new arrangements for Integrated Family Support Teams (IFST), the threshold of referrals for children living with parents with prescribed conditions for example substance misuse will be lower. Professionals will be required to consider whether the parents condition such as acute depression may render the child to be in need and would seek parental consent to make a referral to children's services for assessment and support. The threshold of significant harm however would continue to override the common law duty and Data Protection Act requirements in respect of consent. IFST will offer earlier support to those parents with complex needs so that earlier support can be provided to the family as a whole to reduced risk , address the child's welfare concern.

The Assembly Government is not aware of any instances where parents or adults who report their concerns to the statutory agencies believe that they have been treated differently because of their circumstances or background, however everyone must have complete confidence that they are treated with dignity and respect when concerns about a child are raised. We are not aware of any direct evidence to the contrary, but we will consider what might be done in the context of the current review of safeguarding arrangements in Wales to ensure that those working in child protection are aware of the need for equality of treatment in all circumstances.

Financial Implications: No direct financial implications associated with this recommendation.

Jane Hutt