

Response to Public Accounts Committee recommendations into the costs and value for money of public services for care experienced children and young people

Recommendation 1 - The Committee recommends that the Welsh Government develop a set of indicators to assess the outcomes for care experienced children and make sure they reflect those things that matter to young people. The views of young people must be integral to shaping, informing and evaluating these, and it should be directly informed by the work of the Ministerial Advisory Group and any evaluation of the Bright Spots survey.

Accept – Welsh Government fully recognises the importance of collecting robust data to help inform regular assessments of outcomes for care experienced children. Work is currently well advanced on the development of a Performance and Improvement Framework for Children which will require local authorities to gather data against a set of quality standards, qualitative measures and quantitative measures. Once agreed, the requirements will be introduced from April 2020. We will continue to collect data through the Looked After Children and Children Receiving Care and Support Census.

The Improving Outcomes for Children Ministerial Advisory Group has established a Task and Finish group, led by David Melding AM, to develop a set of indicators to measure progress against its 2017-2020 work programme and improved outcomes for care experienced children. These are currently being refined to ensure they reflect the quality of care being provided and the impact of interventions put in place as part of the Improving Outcomes for Children programme. Additionally, it is important that these indicators do not duplicate those already set out within the draft Performance and Improvement Framework for Children, but provide an enhanced dataset of outcomes that spans the range of policy areas that impact care experienced children, not just children's services. The Ministerial Advisory Group discussed these issues at their December meeting. These indicators, which are in addition to those included in the Framework, will be in place from April 2019.

Following the successful pilot of the Bright Spots survey in six local authorities, we are considering how this valuable survey of care experienced children's experiences and well-being can be rolled out across all local authorities, providing an assessment of care experienced children's well-being across the country. Local authorities will use the learning to improve services for their care experienced children population.

Recommendation 2 - The Committee recommends that the Welsh Government should ensure educational outcomes for Care Experienced Children are measured by “distance travelled” alongside attainment measures, and evaluate the effectiveness of the Pupil Development Grant in obtaining these results.

Accept - As part of the comprehensive programme of education reform underway, the Welsh Government is developing new evaluation and improvement arrangements to be introduced alongside the new curriculum. The central focus of the new arrangements will be an emphasis on the ‘progress’ of individual learners so that they are supported to achieve their best outcomes.

In September, the Cabinet Secretary for Education made a statement in Plenary on the direction of travel for a more intelligent system of evaluation that has the learner at its heart. We will move towards replacing school performance measures with a more rounded self-evaluation process. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and Estyn are working with practitioners to design this framework and further details will be published shortly. Regional education consortia and local authorities are expected to follow the same self-evaluation process and the Welsh Government will do the same. This system will be designed to evaluate performance in teaching and learning of all young people, including care experienced children, developing them to their full potential, not just academically.

The approach to the Pupil Development Grant for looked after children (PDG-LAC) is currently being reviewed. Work to revise PDG-LAC is being undertaken in partnership with regional education consortia and local authorities and is taking into account the recommendations of the Children, Young People and Education Committee in its recent *On the money?* report as well as the recommendations of the forthcoming independent evaluation of PDG-LAC. This work will ensure that both impact and value for money of PDG-LAC are maximised. The new approach will come into effect from April 2019.

Recommendation 3 - The Committee recommends that the public information on the Ministerial Advisory Group is improved on the Welsh Government's website to increase accountability and allow for scrutiny. We recommend, as a minimum, the following is published:

- Membership;
- Minutes of meetings; and
- Performance against indicators.

Accept – Welsh Government agrees that information published on its website about the Improving Outcomes for Children programme and the Ministerial Advisory Group can be improved to ensure greater transparency and scrutiny of its work. An enhanced web page will also improve communication with stakeholders and the public. Information concerning the membership, operation and implementation of the Improving Outcomes for Children programme will be considered for publication. We are exploring options with Social Care Wales on how best we can communicate our work using other portals available.

Welsh Government has noted the Committee's comments concerning the role, function and accountability of the Ministerial Advisory Group. These however are well established. The Group provides advice to the Minister for Children, Older People and Social Care and is accountable to him. David Melding AM, as Chair, reports to the Minister following each meeting. The Improving Outcomes for Children programme 2017-2020 is led and delivered by Welsh Government and has been co-produced with stakeholders and partners on the Ministerial Advisory Group. The Group is made up of all senior leaders in Wales with a role in supporting care experienced children.

Welsh Government does not agree that the minutes of meetings should be published. The Group has been established to advise the Minister. It is for the Minister to consider the advice provided to help inform decision making. Ministerial Advisory Group meetings are designed to enable robust discussions to take place about the existing operational delivery of children's services to help inform future policy direction and the implementation and delivery of new initiatives. Publication of its minutes may impede the free and frank debate that takes place between members.

Recommendation 4 - The Committee recommends that the Welsh Government commission an analysis of independent agency placement costs examining the different outcomes across the life of a child that are delivered for the additional cost to create an informed evidence base for future decisions in this area.

Accept – The National Fostering Framework has already undertaken an analysis of the relative cost of a local authority foster placement compared with a placement with an independent fostering agency. However, concerns have been expressed as to whether the comparison was accurate and whether the breakdown of placement costs covered the same factors and the full range of back-up functions involved for each.

To develop a robust evidence base and an objective comparison between independent agencies and local authority placements, Welsh Government is issuing a research tender as part of a larger exercise about the national commissioning of placements. To examine different outcomes across the life of a child, as the PAC suggests, would require a longitudinal study. Our preferred option is to commission a focussed piece of work, to fully explore the recent pressures on local authority placement availability and the drivers behind the high costs of placements. The outcomes from this initial research will be used to inform recommendations for a national approach for commissioning across the public sector and independent provision. This will cover foster care (mainstream and kinship) and residential care but not secure accommodation, as activity has already been commissioned in this area. A key focus for the work will be on outcomes for the child in placement, as well as on costs and value for money.

Recommendation 5 - The Committee recommends that the Welsh Government undertake an evaluation into the frequency and effectiveness of end of placement reviews with a particular focus on the impact of such reviews on the child concerned.

Accept - The Part 6 Code of Practice requires local authorities to instigate a review of a child's care and support plan following any substantial changes to that plan, such as a placement move or breakdown. The review should set out a comprehensive record of the decisions made and the views of all those consulted including the wishes and feelings of the child about any proposed changes. This includes taking into account the child's wishes and feelings about any proposed changes.

In response to the evidence heard by the Committee concerning the effectiveness and frequency of such reviews, Welsh Government will liaise with Care Inspectorate Wales to ensure this is specifically considered at future inspections of children's services.

We will consider the need to strengthen the Part 6 Code of Practice to include specific guidance on the steps to be followed when it is proposed to move a child to a new placement.

Recommendation 6 - The Committee recommends that the Welsh Government sets out a timeline for the analysis of the delivery of placements. We would not expect this work to take longer than three months to commence and for it to be delivered within twelve months. Following this analysis, the Welsh Government should set out how services should be delivered in line with the ambitions of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014. This could then inform a national strategy for commissioning and managing the full spectrum of placements for Looked After Children.

Accept - The work of the National Fostering Framework and the Children's Residential Care Task and Finish Group has shown the need for a national approach to placement commissioning. We believe that Regional Partnership Boards should have a key role to play in future commissioning arrangements, as this will help ensure an integrated approach across social services, health and education and open up further opportunities for new and innovative approaches to specialist provision (e.g. for children at risk of going into secure accommodation).

The proposed research (set out in recommendation 4) into placements costs and outcomes will provide evidence upon which a national approach to commissioning could be based. This evidence will inform a set of recommendations for a national approach for the commissioning of placements across the public and private sector. We do not believe that a separate piece of work on the delivery of placements is needed. The timeline for moving towards a national commissioning approach will need to reflect the timeline for research. For example, if the research is undertaken during 2019-20, the approach to national commissioning could be developed during 2020-21, with new arrangements coming into force in 2021-22.

Recommendation 7 - The Committee recommends that the Welsh Government commission a review of spending on looked after children across the range of services areas involved in their care for example education, housing and Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service. This is essential to ensure a comprehensive picture of the money invested in supporting this group.

Accept – The strong correlation between the cost of placements and the rate of spend per looked after child in Wales is well recognised. Welsh Government agrees that an assessment of spend on looked after children and the variation between rates of spend between local authority areas in Wales is required. Due to the correlation between spend and placements, an assessment of spend will be built in to the research tender on placement commissioning (see recommendation 4).

Consideration will be given to the scope of this assessment, to ensure a wide range of service areas involved in the care of looked after children are incorporated.

However, the complexities of disaggregating spend per looked after child across the whole range of public services available must be recognised. Due to the way in which local authorities' budgets are set, it is not possible to track funding through the system from Revenue Support Grant payments to service delivery. It is also not possible to disentangle changes in local authority spending that may have arisen from previously-planned decisions, from those that may have arisen from a change in the delivery mechanism of the funding. Many funding streams across housing, education and mental health will be targeted on a child population basis, not solely for care experienced children, meaning that impacts of such funding for care experienced children will be difficult to infer.

Recommendation 8 - The Committee recommend that the Welsh Government undertake a comparative analysis on the variance of spend per looked after child between local authorities to build an information base around variance of cost to drive best practice. This should also reflect the outcomes within each authority and be published once completed. This should be a regular information gathering exercise and having completed this for the 2018-19 period, the Welsh Government should evaluate the information obtained, and set out a timetable for future information gathering.

Accept – As highlighted above, Welsh Government recognises there can be considerable variation in spend per looked after child between local authorities in Wales. This can be for a variety of reasons, including local demographics, the complexity of cases and the cost of placements for those requiring the highest levels of intervention. Local authorities provided evidence to the Committee of only a handful of complex cases placing local authorities under significant cost pressures.

The proposed research into national placement commissioning, costs and outcomes (Recommendations 4, 6 & 7) will include the variation in the cost of different types of placement between local authorities and the link with outcomes and recommendations for future information gathering.

Recommendation 9 - The Committee recommend that at the end of the current financial year, the Welsh Government should review the impact of transferring ring fenced funding for edge of care services into the Revenue Support Grant from April 2018 to assess the impact for care experienced children and edge of care services.

Reject – Following the £5m grant funding in 2017/18, all local authorities in Wales have confirmed they have an edge of care service in place. The Revenue Support Grant is un-hypothecated, meaning that it is up to local authorities how they spend this funding along with income from other funding streams such as council tax, re-distributed non-domestic rates and income from sales, fees and charges.

With regards to service delivery, it is not possible to explicitly assess the impact for care experienced children and edge of care services of transferring this funding into the settlement as these services are now a core part of local authorities' responsibilities.

There is a clear expectation from Welsh Government upon local authorities to focus on reducing the need for care and providing effective support to families to enable them to remain together. This message has been strengthened through the Improving Outcomes for Children programme and further emphasised following the recent announcements of additional funding for local authority children's services. Through our continued engagement with our local authority and children's services partners we expect any concerns to be brought to our attention.

Recommendation 10 - The Committee recommends that the Welsh Government should target ring-fenced funding at edge of care services which, where safe to do so, have the potential to avoid children coming into care. This funding should explore the value of elements such as kinship care. It could also support local authorities to continually monitor outcomes for these individual children and value for money of this preventative spending.

Accept – Since the publication of the Public Accounts Committee report, the Minister for Children, Older People and Social Care has announced an additional £15m for children's services from 2019-20 to help reduce the need for children to enter care. This is on top of the recurrent £5m funding provided to local authorities in 2017/18 for edge of care services announced in 2017/18.

The £15m will be distributed through the Integrated Care Fund to Regional Partnership Boards to help safely reduce the need for children to enter care and supporting children in care. This funding is to support collaborative working between local authorities, local health boards and the third sector to develop early intervention and preventative services for families in need of help and assistance; building on approaches we already know help families avoid crisis situations.

The arrangements for monitoring the impact of this investment will be through a combination of both qualitative and quantitative reports received from the Regional Partnership Boards. Officials are working with regional colleagues to co-design new Integrated Care Fund guidance and reporting processes and exploring Results Based Accountability methodology to better capture and understand the impacts of this investment on the children and young people it supports.

Recommendation 11 - The Committee recommends, that the Welsh Government updates its response to the Children, Young People and Education Committee “Mind over Matter” report by March 2019, providing detailed information about how it intends to address the concerns in that Report in respect of care experienced children as requested by the Chair of that Committee.

Accept - In our response to the Mind over Matter report we accepted the recommendations in relation to care experienced children. We will update the committee on our progress in delivering the commitments set out in our response in the Spring.

Recommendation 12 - The Committee recommends all care-experienced children are routinely made aware of their right to an advocate and provided with clear information about how to access the range of available advocacy services. This should be monitored by the Welsh Government and incorporated into the indicators for the Ministerial Advisory Group.

Accept - The National Approach to statutory advocacy services for children has been in place since June 2017, with Welsh Government providing up to £550k to support the implementation of this approach.

The six collaborative regions are committed to delivering the National Approach in full, each has a regionally commissioned advocacy service along with a standardised performance reporting template for quality monitoring purposes, which includes the ‘active offer’. This information is overseen and monitored by an Implementation Task and Finish Group set up the Ministerial Advisory Group. It is also included in the draft indicators currently being agreed.

An ‘Active Offer’ is a sharing of information about the statutory right and entitlement of a child or young person in particular circumstances to access support from an Independent Professional Advocacy Service.

Children and young people are automatically entitled to a statutory Independent Professional Advocate (IPA) when they become looked after or become subject of child protection enquires (Children Act 1989 section 47). The ‘Active Offer’ is made directly to the child or young person by the Advocacy Service.

The information shared includes an explanation about the role of the Independent Professional Advocacy Service, what it can and cannot do, how it operates based on a child or young person's views, wishes and feelings, its independence and how it works solely for the child/young person, its policy on confidentiality and significant harm – it explains the statutory right of children and young people to be supported to express their views, wishes and feelings as well as their right to make a representation or complaint.