

National Assembly for Wales
Children, Young People and Education
Committee

Inquiry into Educational Outcomes for Children from Low Income Households

February 2015

Cynulliad
Cenedlaethol
Cymru

National
Assembly for
Wales



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Children, Young People and Education Committee

The Committee was established on 22 June 2011 with a remit to examine legislation and hold the Welsh Government to account by scrutinising expenditure, administration and policy matters encompassing: the education, health and wellbeing of the children and young people of Wales, including their social care.

On 22 January 2014, the Assembly agreed to alter the remit of the Committee to include Higher Education. This subject will continue to be included in the remit of the Enterprise and Business Committee, with both committees looking at Higher Education from their particular perspectives. The Committee was previously known as the Children and Young People Committee.

Current Committee membership:



Ann Jones (Chair)
Welsh Labour
Vale of Clwyd



Angela Burns
Welsh Conservatives
Carmarthen West and South
Pembrokeshire



Keith Davies
Welsh Labour
Llanelli



Suzy Davies
Welsh Conservatives
South Wales West



John Griffiths
Welsh Labour
Newport East



Bethan Jenkins
Plaid Cymru
South Wales West



Lynne Neagle
Welsh Labour
Torfaen



David Rees
Welsh Labour
Aberavon



Aled Roberts
Liberal Democrats
North Wales



Simon Thomas
Plaid Cymru
Mid and West Wales

The following Member was also a member of the Committee during this inquiry:



Rebecca Evans
Welsh Labour
Mid and West Wales

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Recommendations

Recommendation 1. The Minister should review and clarify the role of the Foundation Phase to ensure that it can contribute to improved outcomes for children from low-income families. (Page 24)

Recommendation 2. The Minister should revise the target for 7 year olds (the Foundation Phase indicator) to make it more challenging, in order to deliver the Welsh Government's ambitions. (Page 24)

Recommendation 3. The Welsh Government should ensure that evidence-based approaches, such as the Sutton Trust Toolkit, are always used. (Page 24)

Recommendation 4. The Minister should report back to the Committee as soon as possible on progress towards meeting Welsh Government's requirement that schools are required to publish details on their use of PDG on their (or the relevant consortium's) website. (Page 30)

Recommendation 5. The Welsh Government should provide evidence to the Committee relating to the decision about the quantum of funding per pupil for 3 and 4 year olds. (Page 31)

Recommendation 6. The Welsh Government should ensure that the PDG is delivering both the intended outcomes for pupils and value for money. It should respond quickly where there is limited evidence of impact. (Page 31)

Recommendation 7. The Minister should report back to the Committee as a matter of urgency about funding the £7.9 million element of the Challenge fund from existing education and skills budget, with specific reference to the budget lines from which allocations have been transferred. (Page 36)

Recommendation 8. The Minister should report back to the Committee on the amounts and usage of the funding that has been allocated specifically to Consortia from the Schools Challenge Wales fund. (Page 36)

Recommendation 9. The Minister should strengthen and clarify guidance for schools on charging for activities relating to education. If the Minister is not satisfied that current guidance has had the necessary effect, he should introduce statutory guidance. (Page 44)

Recommendation 10. The Minister should issue guidance to schools to ensure that they make clear to parents the educational purposes of proposed school trips. (Page 44)

Recommendation 11. The Minister should report back to the Committee on his work to evaluate the use of non-teaching staff, such as school liaison officers. (Page 44)

Recommendation 12. The Minister should report back to the Committee within 6 months on the progress of initiatives to promote parental engagement, including the Family and Community engagement toolkit. (Page 44)

Executive summary

1. Education in Wales is undergoing significant changes. Since its inquiry began, several new policies have been announced and evaluation reports of existing policies have been published. The publication of the conclusions of the Donaldson review of the curriculum will have a significant impact on the future of education in Wales. However, the principles and key messages in this report still stand and are relevant to Welsh Government strategies and policies of the future.

The effectiveness of Welsh Government strategy

2. The Welsh Government faces considerable challenges in closing the attainment gap for children from low-income families. A number of programmes and initiatives have been introduced over recent years, none of which have demonstrated significant success in closing the attainment gap.

3. The findings of the UK Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission that “change is urgently needed” were a concern for the Committee. That the attainment of Welsh children eligible for free school meals in Wales is lower than most areas of England demonstrates the challenges the Minister faces.

4. The Committee welcomes the Minister’s commitment to this issue and that he has identified it as a priority for his department. Whilst some progress has been made across the key stages in recent years, the scale of the change needed to meet this challenge should not be underestimated.

5. Whilst policies aimed at generally improving attainment levels are welcomed, they result in a “rising tide raises all ships” effect. This will not result in a closing of the attainment gap. Policies must be specifically targeted at raising the attainment of pupils from low-income families.

6. As a matter of priority the Welsh Government must closely monitor whether its funding and policy initiatives aimed at closing the gap are delivering both the intended outcomes for pupils and value for money. It should also respond quickly where there is evidence of limited impact.

7. The Welsh Government should continue with its efforts to ensure that schools, local authorities and regional consortia have a shared understanding of the scale of change that is expected.

Impact of the Foundation Phase

8. We note that evaluation of the Foundation Phase has indicated that it has not had an effect on the attainment levels of children from low-income families. The Minister commented that the Foundation Phase's primary purpose was not to address the gap in attainment.

9. However, given that an important feature of the Foundation Phase was to reduce inequalities in social and education outcomes we would expect it to make some contribution towards closing that gap. Welsh Government must develop an understanding of the reasons for the lack of impact and seek to address them, to ensure that the full potential of the programme is realised.

10. The Minister's commitment to review the Foundation Phase target is welcomed. We believe that this target needs to be more challenging.

Targets

11. There has been a degree of progress in recent years, however, it is clear from Welsh Government's own statistics that the pace of change is not sufficient to meet its ambitions at all key stages.

12. Latest statistics show that whilst the gap has narrowed at the end of the Foundation Phase, the gap at key stage 4 widened for the first time since 2010. The performance of FSM pupils has improved by 4.4 percentage points since the target was set in 2011/12 and their performance needs to increase by a further 9.2 percentage points over the next three years to meet the Welsh Government target.

13. We note the view expressed by witnesses that there needs to be a clear plan for how those targets can be reached in practice. The Committee was told that there are a number of well-meaning and ambitious policies in place, but no clarity or uniform support for delivering them. We note that since our inquiry began the Welsh Government has published its National Deprivation Plan: Re-writing the Future.

14. While there has been some progress towards achieving targets, the Committee is concerned that the pace of change is not sufficient to meet the Welsh Government's stated ambitions. Welsh Government targets need to be stretching, but should not be so difficult to reach as to be unachievable. The Committee will also continue to keep progress under regular review.

Sutton-Trust Toolkit

15. The Committee was concerned by the evidence relating to the low levels of use of the Sutton Trust Toolkit. While the Committee accepts that there is not a universally consistent view on whether the toolkit includes all the evidence based approaches which might be applicable in Wales, it is clear that evidence-based approaches are vital in delivering improvements. Schools should be able to show how their preferred approach is based on evidence.

Recommendations

The Minister should review and clarify the role of the Foundation Phase to ensure that it can contribute to improved outcomes for children from low-income families.

The Minister should revise the target for 7 year olds (the Foundation Phase indicator) to make it more challenging, in order to deliver the Welsh Government's ambitions.

The Welsh Government should ensure that evidence-based approaches, such as the Sutton Trust Toolkit, are always used.

Pupil Deprivation Grant

Evaluation of the PDG

16. The Committee welcomes some of the positive outputs resulting from the PDG, as outlined in Welsh Government's Year 1 evaluation report of the programme. However, there are a number of areas that are a cause for concern, including whether the use of the grant is being targeted at the children from disadvantaged backgrounds (rather than pupils who are underachieving generally) and that in the longer term the investment demonstrates improved outcomes for pupils. We note, for example, that only 60% of children in primary schools and 72% of children in secondary schools who benefitted from PDG were eligible for Free School Meals or were looked after children.

17. The Year 1 evaluation report acknowledged that it is too early in the process to properly assess the impact of the PDG. In our view, it is difficult, therefore, for the Welsh Government to determine at this stage whether the programme is delivering value for money. The Committee will take an on-going interest in whether this is the case given that the sums available to individual schools are significant. We do not wish to see the Welsh

Government replicate a situation where investment does not deliver an identifiable impact for the target group of pupils, such as occurred with the previous 2006 grant (RAISE), which had similar aims.

18. Not all schools appear to be clear about the need to use interventions that are proven to be effective in improving outcomes for pupils from low income households. The fact that less than half of schools are using the Sutton Trust Toolkit, despite the Welsh Government's emphasis on its use, suggests a lack of understanding that interventions funded by the PDG must be based on evidence that they will deliver a change in pupil outcomes.

19. We agree with the Minister's comments that children's needs are complex and a variety of interventions are needed in response. Schools should be allowed to respond to the specific needs of their children in imaginative ways. However, any such approaches should be based on evidence.

20. There must be an increase in transparency about the activities and programmes which schools are funding through the PDG. We are concerned that there has been an inconsistency in the extent to which schools publish the data and the extent to which regional consortia monitor whether this is being done. We note the Minister's comments that schools will be required to publish details of what their PDG is being spent on, either on their websites or that of the relevant consortium. We welcome this development and will seek an update on progress shortly.

21. The Welsh Government must put in place arrangements to monitor the effectiveness of the overall programme rigorously, to ensure that it is having the necessary impact and is delivering value for money.

Extension of the Pupil Deprivation Grant

22. The Committee notes that the extension of the PDG to 3 and 4 year olds has been welcomed by schools. However, the Welsh Government must ensure that the problems mentioned above are addressed, so that the maximum impact of this additional funding can be realised.

23. The Committee notes that funding of £300 has been allocated per eligible 3 and 4 year old pupil. However, it is unclear how this figure has been reached and whether it will be appropriate, in particular given the Welsh Government's stated emphasis on early intervention. The Committee is concerned that Welsh Government initiatives are being extended beyond their original remit when their value is yet to be proven. The Committee

intends to keep this under review and will seek assurance from Welsh Government that this additional investment will achieve a measurable difference in outcomes for children from low income households.

Recommendations

The Minister should report back to the Committee as soon as possible on progress towards meeting Welsh Government's requirement that schools are required to publish details on their use of PDG on their (or the relevant consortium's) website.

The Welsh Government should provide evidence to the Committee relating to the decision about the quantum of funding per pupil for 3 and 4 year olds.

The Welsh Government should ensure that the PDG is delivering both the intended outcomes for pupils and value for money. It should respond quickly where there is limited evidence of impact.

Schools Challenge Cymru

24. The Committee notes that this programme is in its infancy and is open-minded whether this is the right approach and can deliver improvements on the scale that is needed. While similar programmes have had some success, particularly the London Challenge, the findings of the evaluation of the City Challenge were more mixed.

25. The Committee notes, in particular, the feedback from head teachers in Manchester where fewer than half attributed impacts in their school to the Challenge. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that the City Challenge failed in the Black Country, where the proportion of schools deemed to be "inadequate" by Ofsted increased.

26. Welsh Government must ensure that the lessons of previous Challenge programmes are learned. Furthermore, those elements which can be linked to successful outcomes, rather than the model in its entirety, should be taken forward in Wales. Effective interventions must be identified and best practice shared effectively for the programme's impact to be maximised. Welsh Government should identify any factors out-with the Challenge which may have contributed to success, and seek to ensure that they are also put in place.

Funding

27. The Committee has a number of concerns in relation to the funding arrangements for the Challenge.

28. Of the £20 million allocated to the programme, £7.9 million must be found from existing education and skills budgets. The Committee is concerned about the impact this may have on other programmes or initiatives and requests an update from the Minister as soon as possible.

29. The Committee understands that, of the total budget, £3.9 million has been allocated directly to the Consortia. The Committee requests urgent clarification of the purpose of this additional funding and its arrangements for monitoring expenditure of such funds.

30. The Committee notes the Minister's comments that a proportion of the allocated funding could be used to fund capital projects. The Committee requests further information on this issue and the monitoring arrangements that have been put in place to ensure value for money.

31. The Committee notes the Minister's comments that the Consortia have an oversight role in relation to funding. The Committee has no evidence to suggest that Consortia are currently able to exercise such a role effectively. Welsh Government must, therefore, keep these arrangements under thorough review.

Recommendations

The Minister should report back to the Committee as a matter of urgency about funding the £7.9 million element of the Challenge fund from existing education and skills budget, with specific reference to the budget lines from which allocations have been transferred.

The Minister should report back to the Committee on the amounts and usage of the funding that has been allocated specifically to Consortia from the Schools Challenge Wales fund.

Delivery of Welsh Government Policy

32. One of the key messages emerging from this inquiry was that, no matter how ambitious a programme or policy, its impact will be limited without effective methods of delivery. We recognise the importance of school leadership for this agenda. We are concerned that since the creation of the

consortia their roles in relation to local authorities may have led to a lack of clarity, particularly in relation to responsibility and accountability.

33. It will be difficult for schools alone to deliver change on the scale that is needed to close the attainment gap. We have heard extensive evidence that better engagement between schools and parents could, if harnessed correctly, contribute significantly to delivering the change needed. We heard some excellent examples of how this is taking place in primary and secondary schools in Wales. However, good practice is very inconsistent across Wales and, in some cases, parental engagement is non-existent.

34. The Committee welcomes the Minister's commitment to parental engagement and welcomes the Welsh Government's "Education begins at home" campaign and the publication the forthcoming "Family and Community Engagement Toolkit". The challenge for the Welsh Government is to ensure that all governing bodies and in turn schools "buy in" to this agenda.

35. We were extremely concerned to hear evidence about the hidden costs of education. A number of examples were provided to the Committee, including one where a parent had spent a significant proportion of their family's weekly food shopping budget on ingredients for their child to use in a Home Economics GCSE practical exam.

36. The Committee was also concerned to receive evidence that some schools are arranging overseas trips with negligible educational value. This Committee supports the use of school trips, but they should be demonstrably of educational value or contribute to the development of the pupil. We expect that, if a school trip is of educational value, no child should be prevented from participating because of cost.

37. There was a lack of clarity in communication with parents that certain payments were voluntary. The Minister should strengthen and clarify guidance for schools on charging for activities relating to education. The Minister should explore the possibility of introducing statutory guidance, if he is not satisfied that current guidance has had the necessary effect.

38. Finally, the Committee noted the positive response received from parents to non-teaching staff, such as school liaison officers. They can play an important role, particularly in engaging with those hardest-to-reach families, by building relationships and trust. The Committee welcomes the Minister's commitment to undertake some work to explore the impact of such roles.

Recommendations

The Minister should strengthen and clarify guidance for schools on charging for activities relating to education. If the Minister is not satisfied that current guidance has had the necessary effect, he should introduce statutory guidance.

The Minister should issue guidance to schools to ensure that they make clear to parents the educational purposes of proposed school trips.

The Minister should report back to the Committee on his work to evaluate the use of non-teaching staff, such as school liaison officers.

The Minister should report back to the Committee within 6 months on the progress of initiatives to promote parental engagement, including the Family and Community engagement toolkit.

1. Introduction

39. In June 2013, the Committee agreed to undertake an inquiry into the effectiveness of Welsh Government policies in respect of the educational outcomes of children from low-income households. The Committee's intention was to undertake a wide-ranging inquiry, focusing on a number of specific policy areas.

40. Based on the evidence received by the Committee during the first phase of its inquiry, and in the knowledge that the Minister was intending to launch a number of related initiatives, the Committee decided to undertake an additional piece of work focusing on parental engagement and the costs of education.

41. The Committee wrote to the Minister to convey its initial findings in April 2014. The Committee's letter is included at Annex A. The Minister's response is included at Annex B.

Previous Committee inquiries

42. The Children and Young People Committee of the third Assembly undertook an inquiry and published a report in November 2008: *Child Poverty in Wales: Eradication through Education*. Follow up one-off scrutiny sessions were held in 2009 and 2010. The report of the Follow up inquiry into child poverty: eradication through education was published in February 2011.

The Committee's approach

43. During its inquiry, the Committee heard evidence from:

- Estyn;
- Professor David Egan;
- The Bevan Foundation; and
- Save the Children.

44. The Committee held evidence sessions with the Minister for Education and Skills on two occasions during its inquiry.

45. Members also heard from:

- Parents in Swansea and Wrexham during informal visits;

- Staff and a parent involved in School Focused Communities work in Glyncoch, RCT;
- Staff from CaST Cymru and Eirias High School
- Staff from three primary schools with above average and very high levels of Free School Meal (FSM) pupils: Blaenymaes Primary School (Swansea); Goetre Primary School (Merthyr Tydfil); Pillgwenny Primary School (Newport);
- Staff from two secondary schools with above average and very high levels of FSM: Sandfields Comprehensive School (Port Talbot) and Newport High School.

46. Members of the Committee also visited Cadoxton Primary School, Barry with the purpose of visiting a school setting to informally discuss the challenges of addressing the educational outcomes of children from low income households.

2. The effectiveness of Welsh Government strategy

47. Welsh Government's stated 'key policy for education reform', the School Effectiveness Framework (SEF) (2008), identified three interrelated priorities: improving literacy levels; improving numeracy levels; and reducing the impact of poverty on educational attainment. Subsequently, significant emphasis was placed on a strategy which aimed to improve standards of literacy and numeracy.

48. The current Minister for Education and Skills has referred to closing the attainment gap for children from low income households as the 'top priority' for his department.

Education and Skills National Deprivation Plan: Rewriting the future

49. In November 2013, the Minister for Education and Skills announced that Welsh Government was developing a 'National Deprivation Plan' and in June 2014, Welsh Government published guidance aimed at raising the attainment of learners from deprived backgrounds, entitled 'Rewriting the future'. An implementation timeline was also published alongside it. The guidance is based around four themes:

- Family and Community Engagement;
- The Early Years;
- High Quality Learning and Teaching; and
- High Expectations and Aspirations.

UK Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission Report

50. The [UK Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission](#)'s (SMCP) second annual State of the Nation Report, published in October 2014, stated:

"We are especially concerned that poor pupils in Wales lag behind those elsewhere in the UK with only 26 per cent of Welsh children who are eligible for free school meals achieving five good GCSEs (including English and maths) compared with 38 per cent of children eligible for free school meals in England."

51. The Report also said that:

"Better-off pupils are more than twice as likely as those eligible for FSM to achieve five good GCSEs (including English or Welsh and mathematics). The attainment of Welsh children eligible for FSM is

lower than in all but six of the 152 local authority areas in England. This is unacceptable and means that too many poor children in Wales are being let down by the existing schools system. Change is urgently needed.”

Impact of the Foundation Phase

52. The first report into the outcomes for Foundation Phase pupils, published in 2013, found that the programme was not “associated with changes in the differences in outcomes between population sub-groups, such as those defined by gender, ethnicity and socio-economic background”. Referring to free school meals pupils and special educational needs pupils, the report said that “where the potential for narrowing inequalities is greatest, the patterns that existed prior to the introduction of the Foundation Phase are demonstrated to persist following its introduction”.¹

Sutton Trust Toolkit²

53. Welsh Government’s Improving Schools Plan 2012 stated that all schools would be required to apply the Sutton Trust toolkit, or other evidence-based approaches, by December 2012. In written evidence, the Minister for Education and Skills told the Committee that the Welsh Government’s evaluation of the Pupil Deprivation Grant (PDG) indicated that “reference to the Toolkit in Wales appears low”.

Issues

54. NUT Cymru told the Committee that policies were well-meaning and ambitious, but “there is not much clarity of direction on the practical steps, or uniform support, which ensures that implementation and delivery follows”.

55. Estyn felt that practice was inconsistent across Wales. In order to address the attainment gap, a “large cultural shift in attitudes and commitment” would be necessary.

56. A number of organisations were of the view that there was a potential conflict arising from the lack of alignment with policies to support pupils’ wellbeing, which created a situation where schools had competing priorities and might be unsure as to where their emphasis should be.

¹ <http://wales.gov.uk/statistics-and-research/evaluation-foundation-phase/>

² [Sutton Trust-EEF Teaching and Learning Toolkit](#) [accessed 11 November 2013]

57. Estyn stressed the importance of preventative approaches in raising the standards and wellbeing of disadvantaged learners. Others also referred to the potential impact of early-years programmes such as the Foundation Phase. Other evidence highlighted the importance of programmes within other Ministerial portfolios, such as Flying Start, Communities First and Families First. They stated that these could also play a vital role. However, some respondents drew attention to what they felt were the limitations of area-based initiatives, such as Flying Start, suggesting that their limitations should be borne in mind in the context of shaping policies aimed at improving outcomes for pupils from low income households.

58. Contributors to the inquiry also referred to the importance of the curriculum in relation to pupil attainment. Estyn suggested that the Donaldson curriculum review provided an opportunity to strengthen and build capacity in respect of the outcomes for children from low income households. The Bevan Foundation said that in the course of its work “comments have often been made about the role of the curriculum” in respect of its appropriateness for children from low-income households as well as its potential to equip such children with life skills.

59. Another theme which emerged during the inquiry was the educational outcomes relating to specific groups of children and young people who are more likely to experience poverty, for example Gypsy and Traveller children; disabled children; children with speech, language and communication needs; minority ethnic children; and pupils with additional learning needs. It was suggested that assessing and then tailoring support to meet the specific needs of such groups of children could have an impact on the overall educational outcomes of children from low income households. It was also suggested that policies which focus on the needs of specific groups could also overcome the perceived shortcomings of area-based initiatives.

Welsh Government targets

60. Welsh Government’s, Building Resilient Communities: Taking Forward the Tackling Poverty Action Plan, July 2013 includes two targets: one at the end of the Foundation Phase and one at key stage 4.

Foundation Phase target

61. The Foundation Phase indicator measures the percentage of pupils achieving the expected outcomes in teacher assessments:

Target: To narrow the gap in attainment levels between learners aged 7 eligible for free school meals and those that are not eligible for free school meals, who achieve the expected levels at the end of the Foundation Phase, as measured by the Foundation Phase Indicator, by 10 per cent by 2017. The difference between e-FSM and non-FSM attainment in 2012 was 18.3 per cent.

62. The target is to reduce the gap by 1.83 percentage points over 6 years, which is 10 per cent of the original 18.3 per cent gap recorded in the year 2011/2012.

63. In response to a question about whether he felt the target was ambitious enough, the Minister told the Committee:

“I do not believe that it is and I think that target needs to be revised. The target represents 10% of the gap; that is why it is an odd figure of 1.83%. We can already be confident that that target will be breached. In the very nature of good targets, I think that we need a new one that stretches us beyond our comfort zone in terms of those young people, so I am looking at that currently.”

64. Latest published statistics show that the gap between free school meal (FSM) and non FSM Foundation Phase pupils stood at 16.3 percentage points in 2014, which represents a narrowing of the gap by 1.4 percentage points compared with 2012/2013. In reference to the target, the Minister stated:

“While it is not possible to draw conclusions from only 2 years of data, if this rate of improvement continues the gap would have narrowed by 3 percentage points by 2017. In other words, the Foundation Phase target will have been exceeded by 1.2 percentage points.”

Key Stage 4 Target

Target: To improve the overall attainment levels of students eligible for free school meals, measured as the proportion of learners eligible for free school meals at age 15 who achieve Level 2 inclusive at Key Stage 4 (GCSE grade C or above in English or Welsh and Mathematics or equivalent), to 37 per cent by 2017. In 2012 it was 23.4 per cent.

65. This target differs from the Foundation Phase Target in that it measures the performance of the FSM cohort, rather than the gap in attainment.

66. In 2013/14, at Key Stage 4, 27.8 per cent of FSM pupils achieved the Level 2 threshold (including a GCSE A*-C in English/Welsh and Maths) compared to 61.6 per cent of non-FSM pupils.

67. The performance of FSM pupils has improved by 4.4 percentage points since the target was set in 2011/12. The performance of FSM pupils needs to increase by a further 9.2 percentage points over the next three years to meet Welsh Government's target.

68. In his paper, the Minister said:

“Given this accelerating rate of improvement, supported by the impact of the PDG, strengthened guidance, resource materials and the range of other measures we have implemented or are developing means that we are on track to meet the target for Key Stage 4.”

Issues

69. The Committee was told by respondents that, while progress had been made, more needed to be done to achieve the scale of change needed to meet the targets.

70. The Bevan Foundation questioned whether the current types of interventions could have sufficient impact to deliver that scale of change. The importance of having a plan to achieve the targets was also emphasised.

71. Another issue raised by witnesses was that interventions in this policy area have generally impacted on attainment for *all* children, rather than a specific cohort. It was a case of “a rising tide raises all ships” and, consequently, it was difficult to identify interventions to close the attainment gap.

Minister's evidence

72. In relation to the impact that Welsh Government policies were having in this area, the Minister referred to the review of the first year of the PDG, and said:

“One of the most interesting phrases—I might be paraphrasing a little—within the report is that we are seeing a culture change starting to crystallise within the school system and, of course, there is considerable overlap with other programmes like Communities First and, indeed, the transition between Flying Start and the foundation phase in terms of the working of schools.”

73. The Minister went on to say:

“This is a very broad, complex agenda, but I think that we are starting to see early signs of the gap beginning to close and, in fact, if you take a look at the core subject indicators for key stage 2, key stage 3 and the latest GCSE results at key stage 4, we are beginning, I think, to see the beginnings of a glimmer of a start of a shift in terms of that gap closing down. I accept that this is going to need relentless pressure, and endless vigilance as well, in terms of making sure that that momentum is maintained.”

74. In reference to the impact of the Foundation Phase, the Minister indicated that he felt that improvements could be made in the consistency of Foundation Phase provision and the provision of professional development, but emphasised that the programme’s primary purpose was not “in and of itself, [...] a piece of machinery that was designed, frankly, to favour particularly that group of young people [*i.e. people from low-income households*].”

Committee’s view

75. The Welsh Government faces considerable challenges in closing the attainment gap for children from low-income families. A number of programmes and initiatives have been introduced over recent years, none of which have demonstrated significant success in closing the attainment gap.

76. The findings of the UK Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission that “change is urgently needed” were a concern for the Committee. That the attainment of Welsh children eligible for free school meals in Wales is lower than most areas of England demonstrates the challenges the Minister faces.

77. The Committee welcomes the Minister’s commitment to this issue and that he has identified it as a priority for his department. Whilst some progress has been made across the key stages in recent years, the scale of the change needed to meet this challenge should not be underestimated.

78. Whilst policies aimed at generally improving attainment levels are welcomed, they result in a “rising tide raises all ships” effect. This will not result in a closing of the attainment gap. There is a need for policies specifically targeted at raising the attainment of pupils from low-income families.

79. As a matter of priority the Welsh Government must closely monitor whether it's funding and policy initiatives aimed at closing the gap are delivering both the intended outcomes for pupils and value for money. It should also respond quickly where there is limited evidence of impact.

80. The Welsh Government should continue with its efforts to ensure that schools, local authorities and regional consortia have a shared understanding of the scale of change that is expected.

Impact of the Foundation Phase

81. We note that evaluation of the Foundation Phase has indicated that it has not had an effect on the attainment levels of children from low-income families. The Minister commented that the Foundation Phase's primary purpose was not to address the gap in attainment.

82. However, given that an important feature of the Foundation Phase was to reduce inequalities in social and education outcomes we would expect it to make some contribution towards closing that gap. Welsh Government must develop an understanding of the reasons for the lack of impact and seek to address them, to ensure that the full potential of the programme is realised.

83. The Minister's commitment to review the Foundation Phase target is welcomed. We believe that this target needs to be more challenging.

Targets

84. There has been a degree of progress in recent years, however, it is clear from Welsh Government's own statistics that the pace of change is not sufficient to meet its ambitions at all key stages.

85. Latest statistics show that whilst the gap has narrowed at the end of the Foundation Phase, the gap at key stage 4 widened for the first time since 2010. The performance of FSM pupils has improved by 4.4 percentage points since the target was set in 2011/12 and their performance needs to increase by a further 9.2 percentage points over the next three years to meet the Welsh Government target.

86. We note the view expressed by witnesses that there needs to be a clear plan for how those targets can be reached in practice. The Committee was told that there are a number of well-meaning and ambitious policies in place, but no clarity or uniform support for delivering them. We note that since

our inquiry began the Welsh Government has published its National Deprivation Plan: Re-writing the Future.

87. While there has been some progress towards achieving targets, the Committee is concerned that the pace of change is not sufficient to meet the Welsh Government's stated ambitions. Welsh Government targets need to be stretching, but should not be so difficult to reach as to be unachievable. The Committee will also continue to keep progress under regular review.

Sutton-Trust Toolkit

88. The Committee was concerned by the evidence relating to the low levels of use of the Sutton Trust Toolkit. While the Committee accepts that there is not a universally consistent view on whether the toolkit includes all the evidence based approaches which might be applicable in Wales, it is clear that evidence-based approaches are vital in delivering improvements. Schools should be able to show how their preferred approach is based on evidence.

Recommendations

The Minister should review and clarify the role of the Foundation Phase to ensure that it can contribute to improved outcomes for children from low-income families.

The Minister should revise the target for 7 year olds (the Foundation Phase indicator) to make it more challenging, in order to deliver the Welsh Government's ambitions.

The Welsh Government should ensure that evidence-based approaches, such as the Sutton Trust Toolkit, are always used.

3. Pupil Deprivation Grant

89. Welsh Government allocated £82.046 million in its 2015-16 budget for the Pupil Deprivation Grant (PDG) programme. During the Committee's draft budget scrutiny on 23 October 2014, the Minister for Education and Skills explained how funding allocations reflected his priorities:

“I am very pleased to see that there is a very clear prioritisation emerging through my budget—I think that it is self-evident—in terms of the commitment to the pupil deprivation grant, which is a considerable, if not historic, commitment and tribute to the political will to break that link between under-attainment and the deprivation figures.”

90. The allocation constitutes an additional £10.8 million in 2015-16, compared to the 2014-15 baseline. This is intended to finance an increase in the amount each school receives for each pupil eligible for free school meals from £918 to £1,050. This amount will increase to £1,150 in 2016-17.

Extension of Pupil Deprivation Grant to 3 and 4 year olds

91. As part of the Welsh Government's Budget Agreement with the Welsh Liberal Democrats, the Welsh Government's budget for 2015-16 included £3.8 million to extend the Pupil Deprivation Grant programme to under 5 year olds. The Minister provided further detail in a [letter](#) to the committee in which he said that the allocation was based on a sum of £300 for each pupil that meets the free school meal criteria in both maintained and non-maintained educational settings, including nursery class pupils and reception class pupils, but not children based with child minders. The Minister informed the Committee that work was underway to “develop a suitable distribution methodology and a mechanism for local authorities to establish eligibility”.

Evaluation of the PDG: Year 1 report

92. On 22 October 2014, Welsh Government published the Year 1 report of the evaluation of the PDG, which it had commissioned Ipsos MORI and WISERD (based at Cardiff University) to undertake. The Minister's written evidence suggested that, in the main, the findings were positive whilst recognising that work was needed in some areas.

93. The Year 1 report focused more on the process of implementing the PDG, rather than its impact, which will be covered in later stages of the evaluation. Some of its key findings were:

- The introduction of the PDG had led to a substantial amount of new activity in schools aimed at supporting disadvantaged pupils. Over half of the interventions currently funded using the PDG (58% in primary schools, 71% in secondary schools) were not run in schools prior to the PDG's introduction;
- Whilst PDG expenditure makes up a relatively small proportion on schools' funding (less than 4% on average), the sums available to individual schools are significant. Primary schools received an average of £12,676 in 2012-13 whilst secondary schools received an average of £61,311;
- The vast majority of schools (around 90%) reported supplementing PDG funding from their own resources, usually the general schools budget and/or the School Effectiveness Grant (SEG), to fund 'PDG activities'. The report states 'it is clear that the impact of the PDG is reliant on the existence of other grants and funds with complementary aims';
- There remains some ambiguity about how the PDG should be targeted. Schools typically apply a wider definition of disadvantage than merely free school meal (FSM) eligibility meaning that PDG funded activities extend to a large number of non-FSM eligible pupils and non-looked after children. The suggested reason was that, based on case study evidence, schools sometimes regard activities they would like to fund through the PDG as beneficial to pupils more generally;
- Only 60% of pupils benefitting from PDG in primary schools were pupils eligible for FSM or looked after children. The same was true for 72% of pupils benefitting in secondary schools. However, the vast majority of schools used their own resources to supplement PDG activities meaning they were not necessarily spending the PDG funds themselves for purposes other than those intended (on non FSM eligible pupils or non-looked after children). The evaluation report argued this would be complex to disentangle, although the Minister's paper highlights that, across all schools surveyed in 2012/13, almost half of funding for PDG activities was from non-PDG budgets;
- Schools were targeting PDG activities broadly as they interpreted the PDG as aiming to tackle disadvantage rather than simply financial

deprivation, and because they interpreted the PDG as aiming to improve attainment amongst current low attainers;

- In primary schools, PDG funding was often used to fund literacy (37% of cases) and numeracy (25% of cases) programmes but less so in secondary schools where only 17% of interventions were literacy based and 16% numeracy based. At the secondary level, there was greater use of interventions aimed at pastoral issues;
- Less than half of schools (36% primary, 49% secondary) reported using the Sutton Trust Toolkit, despite its endorsement within Welsh Government's guidance on use of the PDG;
- There was limited evidence that schools were actively using PDG funding to build links with the local community or on parental engagement;
- Most teachers surveyed perceived that PDG interventions were having a positive impact on pupils. They were more positive about the impact on outcomes such as pupil engagement and well-being, than on outcomes such as attainment and attendance;
- Whilst there had been a narrowing of the attainment gap (between FSM and non-FSM eligible pupils) in some measures of achievement at Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4, this improvement pre-dated the PDG and the rate of improvement among FSM eligible pupils was unchanged since its introduction. However, the evaluation report acknowledged that it was too early to form judgements on the impact on attainment.

Monitoring the use of PDG funds

94. Welsh Government has made it clear that PDG funding should only be used for identified purposes: to improve attainment for eligible free school meals and looked after children. Welsh Government guidance states that PDG funding can be used for whole-school initiatives that will particularly benefit learners who are eligible for Free School Meals and looked after children.

95. In its [Short Guide for Practitioners](#) (December 2013), reference is made to the RAISE programme and its outcomes:

“The funding is not for tackling underachievement across the school. The SEG provides support to improve underachievement generally, with a particular focus on literacy and numeracy. The RAISE grant failed to achieve its objective to reduce the difference in attainment between e-FSM learners and their peers because many schools

focussed on under-achievement, rather than tackling the impact of poverty on educational attainment.”

Issues

96. A number of issues were raised during the Committee’s inquiry in relation to the Pupil Deprivation Grant. Concerns were raised by respondents that it was seen as an extension of normal funding schemes. Furthermore, the Committee was told there were examples of the Grant being used to fund generic ‘projects’, aimed at raising overall attainment, rather than that of children from low income households specifically. The Grant was also often seen as a way of filling holes in school budgets.

Minister’s evidence

97. The Minister emphasised the importance of evidence-based interventions but acknowledged that a number of schools were not using the Sutton Trust Toolkit. He spoke about the complexity of children’s needs and, consequently, the need for a range of interventions to assist them. He said schools could use the Pupil Deprivation Grant in imaginative ways, however, he emphasised that Pupil Deprivation Grant funding should be used to fund interventions based on evidence:

“In terms of the evidence base that we are suggesting that schools use carefully when they implement PDG interventions, there is a raft of evidence there going back donkeys’ years through Estyn and through the Sutton Trust and all the rest of it. [...] the evidence keeps on saying the same things: excellence in teaching and learning; give children good feedback; use your data very carefully within the school and keep on top of it; develop your professionals—keep your professionals training and updating their skills. Those lessons are repeated ad infinitum by school inspectorates and by the academics as well.”

98. In relation to the use of the Pupil Deprivation grant, the Minister said:

“I have tightened up the guidance around that. I have asked consortia to take a very close and sceptical view of exactly what the PDG is being spent on, and, of course, we will also move now to requiring schools to publish on their website—or if they do not have a website, on the consortium website—exactly what they are spending the money on. We are refreshing the guidance around all of this as I speak. So, this is, in part, in response to that.”

99. The Minister assured the Committee that schools' use of PDG funding is being rigorously monitored and that, if necessary, he would seek to 'claw back' any money which was found to be inappropriately spent.

100. In relation to changes to inspection arrangements, the Minister said:

"The new school categorisation system will take a specific look at how children on free school meals are doing within every school. The top 'green' category will be inaccessible to schools that are not doing right by that group of children. Estyn, as I said, has a renewed role in terms of asking questions around the attainment and provision for children of free school meals, and the consortia also have a specific ask in terms of making sure that the PDG is spent wisely and well."

Committee's view

101. The Committee welcomes some of the positive outputs resulting from the PDG, as outlined in Welsh Government's Year 1 evaluation report of the programme. However, there are a number of areas that are a cause for concern, including whether the use of the grant is being targeted at the children from disadvantaged backgrounds (rather than pupils who are underachieving generally) and that in the longer term the investment demonstrates improved outcomes for pupils. We note, for example, that only 60% of children in primary schools and 72% of children in secondary schools who benefitted from PDG were eligible for Free School Meals or were looked after children.

102. The Year 1 evaluation report acknowledged that it is too early in the process to properly assess the impact of the PDG. In our view, it is difficult, therefore, for the Welsh Government to determine at this stage whether the programme is delivering value for money. The Committee will take an on-going interest in whether this is the case given that the sums available to individual schools are significant. We do not wish to see the Welsh Government replicate a situation where investment does not deliver an identifiable impact for the target group of pupils, such as occurred with the previous 2006 grant (RAISE), which had similar aims.

103. Not all schools appear to be clear about the need to use interventions that are proven to be effective in improving outcomes for pupils from low income households. The fact that less than half of schools are using the Sutton Trust Toolkit, despite the Welsh Government's emphasis on its use, suggests a lack of understanding that interventions funded by the PDG must be based on evidence that they will deliver a change in pupil outcomes.

104. We agree with the Minister's comments that children's needs are complex and a variety of interventions are needed in response. Schools should be allowed to respond to the specific needs of their children in imaginative ways. However, any such approaches should be based on evidence.

105. There must be an increase in transparency about the activities and programmes which schools are funding through the PDG. We are concerned that there has been an inconsistency in the extent to which schools publish the data and the extent to which regional consortia monitor whether this is being done. We note the Minister's comments that schools will be required to publish details of what their PDG is being spent on, either on their websites or that of the relevant consortium. We welcome this development and will seek an update on progress shortly.

106. The Welsh Government must put in place arrangements to monitor the effectiveness of the overall programme rigorously, to ensure that it is having the necessary impact and is delivering value for money.

Extension of the Pupil Deprivation Grant

107. The Committee notes that the extension of the PDG to 3 and 4 year olds has been welcomed by schools. However, the Welsh Government must ensure that the problems mentioned above are addressed, so that the maximum impact of this additional funding can be realised.

108. The Committee notes that funding of £300 has been allocated per eligible 3 and 4 year old pupil. However, it is unclear how this figure has been reached and whether it will be appropriate, in particular given the Welsh Government's stated emphasis on early intervention. The Committee is concerned that Welsh Government initiatives are being extended beyond their original remit when their value is yet to be proven. The Committee intends to keep this under review and will seek assurance from Welsh Government that this additional investment will achieve a measurable difference in outcomes for children from low income households.

Recommendations

The Minister should report back to the Committee as soon as possible on progress towards meeting Welsh Government's requirement that schools are required to publish details on their use of PDG on their (or the relevant consortium's) website.

The Welsh Government should provide evidence to the Committee relating to the decision about the quantum of funding per pupil for 3 and 4 year olds.

The Welsh Government should ensure that the PDG is delivering both the intended outcomes for pupils and value for money. It should respond quickly where there is limited evidence of impact.

4. School Challenge Cymru

109. Welsh Government's School Challenge Cymru programme was launched in schools in September 2014, with the aim of improving the performance of 40 of Wales' underperforming secondary schools.

110. The model is based on the London Challenge 2003-08 and the City Challenge 2008-2011, which incorporated London, Greater Manchester and the Black Country. Some of the key findings from the evaluation report of this programme included:

- The fall in the number of schools below the floor target was greater in City Challenge areas than elsewhere, and the percentage of primary and secondary pupils reaching the expected level also improved more than elsewhere;
- The attainment of pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) increased by more than the national figure in all areas (with the exception of Greater Manchester primary pupils);
- The attainment gap between pupils eligible for FSM narrowed for London primary and secondary pupils, and Greater Manchester primary pupils; and
- The proportion of Ofsted inspected 'Good' and 'Outstanding' schools increased in all three areas. In London and Manchester the percentage of 'inadequate' schools decreased, in the Black Country, it increased in both sectors.

111. Head teachers' perceptions of the impact of the City Challenge was mixed. Fewer than half of head teachers in Manchester agreed with a range of statements which positively attributed impacts in their school to the City Challenge.

Criteria for selecting the schools

112. The 40 'Pathways to Success' schools taking part in Welsh Government's School Challenge Cymru programme were announced by the Minister in May 2014. The accompanying statement said:

"Schools have been chosen using a range of performance data and information that highlights the challenges they face in terms of their circumstances and stage of development. They have been also been chosen as it is believed they have the potential to deliver swift and positive improvements for learners."

Funding

113. The programme was allocated £20 million of funding by Welsh Government over three years, made up of a £12.1 million Barnett consequential from the Autumn Statement 2013 and £7.9 million from existing Education and Skills budgets. In relation to where this additional funding would be found, the Minister informed the Committee that:

“In respect of the remaining £7.9million, we are currently looking at how our portfolio could be used to support delivery of the programme, alongside managing competing in-year priorities and implementing in-year reductions.”

114. The £20m funding allocated for the scheme will be allocated according to the development and improvement needs of each Pathways to Success school. The Central South Consortium website outlines how funding will be allocated to schools:

“Pathways to Success schools will be supported by their Schools Challenge Cymru Adviser in drafting a Single School Development Plan – a comprehensive map of the next stage of the school’s improvement journey, with stretching targets for success. The plan will identify and cost improvement activity above and beyond actions that would already be in place via for example PDG and SEG plans. [...]Funding will be released to support agreed improvement activity. Some funding will be for ‘in kind’ support – e.g. school to school, peer to peer; some will support other improvement activity. The mechanism for this will be agreed and in place by September 2014.”

Minister’s evidence

115. In relation to measuring the scheme’s success, the Minister’s paper stated that:

“Given the Challenge’s focus on breaking the link between deprivation and attainment, its overall success will be measured in how effectively attainment is raised by pupils eligible for Free School Meals – most obviously measured by the Level 2 attainment of pupils eligible for Free School Meals, alongside L2 attainment for all pupils. This is in addition to the Pathways to Success Schools’ own success measures.”

116. In response to a question about the funding available for Schools Challenge Cymru, and whether it was sufficient to deliver the impact needed, the Minister explained:

“The intention of the resource is not to drive the programme—you cannot drive this sort of programme, even if you allocated the entire £20 million to a single school. You cannot drive this sort of school improvement by spending your way out of it or through it. The people involved have to change what they are doing in order to deliver on the Schools Challenge.”

117. The Minister highlighted professional development as an example of the types of activity for which schools could use the funding. He also said:

“There is a small element connected to capital, so if a school felt that its science labs were in such a terrible state that it was having a morale-diminishing effect on that department and then that was communicated to the children, we would take a look at that school’s request to spend some capital to tidy up that situation. However, the amount of money is only about oiling the wheels of the programme; it is not an amount of money that can retrain an entire staff body and refurbish the school—it is not of that degree.”

118. In response to a question about the method by which total funding would be allocated between the selected schools, the Minister said:

“The consortia do have a role to play here in terms of oversight and in terms of providing their expert guidance and so on, so there is a regional element to the spend, but, as I have said, in terms of the allocation going to the school, it is intended to be bespoke and is a matter of negotiation between the head and the chair of governors at that school and the adviser. There are schools that have made modest bids—because the money is not the central thing in the programme; as I have said, it is changes in ways of working that really are at the centre of things—and there are schools that have made more ambitious bids in terms of allocation of money. So, there will not be a set allocation.”

119. The Minister also spoke about the “Pupil Offer”, which he described as:

“[...] something that we are developing in the context of our Schools Challenge Cymru programme: an innovative and exciting initiative that will inject resources, alongside proven expertise, to deliver a

package of tailored support to meet the needs of 40 of our most challenged secondary schools and their cluster primaries.”

120. The Minister explained that the “Pupil Offer would be “embedded as a central feature of the Schools Challenge Cymru programme over the course of the following year”.

Committee’s view

121. The Committee notes that this programme is in its infancy and is open-minded whether this is the right approach and can deliver improvements on the scale that is needed. While similar programmes have had some success, particularly the London Challenge, the findings of the evaluation of the City Challenge were more mixed.

122. The Committee notes, in particular, the feedback from head teachers in Manchester where fewer than half attributed impacts in their school to the Challenge. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that the City Challenge failed in the Black Country, where the proportion of schools deemed to be “inadequate” by Ofsted increased.

123. Welsh Government must ensure that the lessons of previous Challenge programmes are learned. Furthermore, those elements which can be linked to successful outcomes, rather than the model in its entirety, should be taken forward in Wales. Effective interventions must be identified and best practice shared effectively for the programme’s impact to be maximised. Welsh Government should identify any factors out-with the Challenge which may have contributed to success, and seek to ensure that they are also put in place.

Funding

124. The Committee has a number of concerns in relation to the funding arrangements for the Challenge.

125. Of the £20 million allocated to the programme, £7.9 million must be found from existing education and skills budgets. The Committee is concerned about the impact this may have on other programmes or initiatives and requests an update from the Minister as soon as possible.

126. The Committee understands that, of the total budget, £3.9 million has been allocated directly to the Consortia. The Committee requests urgent clarification of the purpose of this additional funding and its arrangements for monitoring expenditure of such funds.

127. The Committee notes the Minister's comments that a proportion of the allocated funding could be used to fund capital projects. The Committee requests further information on this issue and the monitoring arrangements that have been put in place to ensure value for money.

128. The Committee notes the Minister's comments that the Consortia have an oversight role in relation to funding. The Committee has no evidence to suggest that Consortia are currently able to exercise such a role effectively. Welsh Government must, therefore, keep these arrangements under thorough review.

Recommendations

The Minister should report back to the Committee as a matter of urgency about funding the £7.9 million element of the Challenge fund from existing education and skills budget, with specific reference to the budget lines from which allocations have been transferred.

The Minister should report back to the Committee on the amounts and usage of the funding that has been allocated specifically to Consortia from the Schools Challenge Wales fund.

5. Delivering Welsh Government policy

129. During the Committee's inquiry, a number of issues were highlighted as being vital to the effective delivery of Welsh Government policies and initiatives already outlined in this report.

Role of teachers/head teachers/governing bodies/local authorities/regional consortia

130. The Committee was told that there needed to be strengthened guidance for local authorities, consortia and schools in relation to closing the attainment gap. Different schools were giving the issue different emphasis and were often unclear about what constituted best practice.

131. Leadership was emphasised as being central to the effective delivery of policies "on the ground". There were important roles for consortia, school governors and head teachers who, through their leadership, could drive forward improvements and engage effectively with the community. However, in reference to the role of school governors, the Committee was told that there was a feeling that they were "not empowered sufficiently" to take the role that was necessary.

132. The importance of training and continuous professional development for teachers and teaching assistants was clear from the evidence.

133. The use of data, assessments and pupil tracking was also described as an important tool to address attainment and monitor progress. There was a feeling, however, that there was a lack of clear processes and robust analysis of data.

134. Respondents emphasised the value of interventions based on evidence, but many highlighted reports that schools were not using the Sutton Trust toolkit.

Minister's evidence

135. In response to a question about the progress of the consortia, the Minister said:

"I have just completed four challenging review events with each of the four consortia, and although I would accept that each one of the four is at a different stage of development, I am content, after directly cross-examining, if you like, the chief executives and chairs of each consortium, that the consortium system is beginning to have traction.

I was very struck by the comment of a north Wales headteacher, actually, who told me that GwE in north Wales had transformed his sense of being supported, in terms of the school improvement work that he was undertaking.”

136. The Minister went on to tell the Committee about improvements he had introduced relating to communication with head teachers:

“I have put great emphasis since my appointment on improving direct communication with partners and [...] head teachers. There is now direct from my department a regular electronic newsletter, which should be keeping head teachers up to speed with all developments around what is happening in the consortium and a plethora of other issues, too.”

Parental engagement

137. During its inquiry, the Committee discussed this issue with:

- Parents in Swansea and Wrexham during informal visits;
- Staff and a parent involved in School Focused Communities work in Glyncoch, RCT;
- Staff from CaST Cymru and Eirias High School;
- Staff from three primary schools with above average and very high levels of Free School Meal (FSM) pupils: Blaenymaes Primary School (Swansea); Goetre Primary School (Merthyr Tydfil); Pillgwenny Primary School (Newport);
- Staff from two secondary schools with above average and very high levels of FSM: Sandfields Comprehensive School (Port Talbot) and Newport High School; and
- Members of the Committee also visited Cadoxton Primary School, Barry.

138. Several studies have concluded that schools alone cannot overcome the links between child poverty and attainment and emphasised the importance of both parental and community engagement³. Professor Egan stated that good practice in engaging parents could bring about the transformation that is needed, but it is “too limited, fragile and almost random” in its occurrence.

³ Egan. D; [Communities, families and schools together: a route to reducing the impact of poverty on educational attainment on educational achievement in schools across Wales](#); May 2012, Save the Children Cymru.

He also suggested that there is a need for robust and detailed evidence on the impact of engagement, especially for Wales-specific programmes.

139. It was emphasised that successful engagement with parents should be an ongoing process, and which should be nurtured and maintained in order to be effective. There is considerable variation in the amounts and quality of parental engagement, even at very local levels. This was often due to individual head teachers taking a strong leadership role to drive engagement.

140. Schools should use a range of strategies, including at the level of individual families. Those schools which were successful were monitoring and evaluating the impact of their strategies, for example by tracking hits on its school website and surveying parents on a regular basis to canvass their views.

141. It was suggested that the introduction of certain policies had unintended consequences on relationships between parents and teachers. NUT Cymru said that “frontline teachers have given consistent feedback that school banding, literacy and numeracy testing, and no doubt in time, the introduction of truancy fines, have all undermined that existing relationship [with parents].”

142. Effective communication was a key issue for meaningful engagement with parents – a variety of engagement methods, tailored to the different needs of parents, was seen as best practice. Examples were given of schools using a range of methods to communicate with parents, with an emphasis on accessibility. However, successful schools often found that the best way to engage with parents was to communicate and work with them face-to-face. Such schools have more than an “open door” policy. For example, in some primary schools, senior leaders and members of staff deliberately plan to meet parents at the beginning and end of the school day.

143. In relation to written communication with parents, many suggested that the language used was often complex or difficult to understand, and that accessibility for parents of all abilities should be borne in mind when, for example, sending letters home with pupils. Parents also told the Committee that they became more engaged with schools when they received positive feedback from the school (such as a postcard from the teacher praising good behaviour), rather than being contacted by the school only when there was a problem.

144. The Committee was told by some parents that they were unable to help their children with schoolwork as they lacked the basic skills to do so. Some parents said they had to have several jobs “to make ends meet” and this had an impact on the time they had to build relationships with the school and to help children with homework.

145. A number of respondents told the Committee about the importance of staff whose role was to foster parental engagement e.g. family inclusion workers. In relation to this, some head teachers told us that uncertainty about the long-term funding of the Pupil Deprivation grant impacts on forward planning.

146. Many contributors to the Committee’s inquiry emphasised the importance of the role of Community Focused Schools. When parents saw the school as a central part of the community, it generally led to improvements in engagement.

Costs associated with education

147. A key issue raised by parents was the cost associated with education. This was not only a barrier to pupil participation, but could be a barrier to parental engagement. It was clear from the Committee’s discussions with parents that there was a lack of clarity about policies on this issue, with many parents not knowing that some costs were voluntary. Parents told us:

- They felt assumptions were made by the school that parents could afford to pay for trips and equipment;
- Multiple requests for money were often received at the same time; this was difficult when there is more than one child in the family;
- Costs “mounted up” for trips even when they initially appeared to be inexpensive e.g. money for bus; packed lunches; cost of the trip; and appropriate clothing;
- There were often “hidden costs”, such as GCSE art coursework where a parent had paid for 200 photos to be printed at 5 pence each; another example was the cost of the Home Economics GCSE, due to the need to purchase ingredients;
- Potential costs could sometimes influence decisions relating to education, such as which GCSE course to take; and
- A school in a deprived area had arranged a trip to New York and parents had felt under pressure to agree their children could go, despite not being able to afford it.

148. Another issue that was drawn to the Committee's attention was the potential impact of digital poverty for children from low-income households.

149. Professor Egan stated that "on the whole point about uniforms, trips and so forth, there is no evidence, of course, that any of that improves outcomes. However, all professionals feel that that is the right thing to do in terms of mitigating the effects of poverty."

Minister's evidence

150. In relation to parental engagement, the Minister's evidence referred to:

- Welsh Government's 'Family and Community Engagement Toolkit' due to be published in January 2015, with an implementation plan published alongside it;
- Welsh Government's "Education Begins at Home" campaign; and
- Work being undertaken with Estyn to produce supplementary guidance for inspectors in respect of parental engagement.

151. When he gave oral evidence to the Committee, the Minister emphasised his commitment to addressing parental engagement and acknowledged that, if it was not tackled, it would "have an enormous multiplier effect in terms of the kids' attainment". He went on to say:

"It has to be tackled on various levels. Colleagues will have noticed the television campaign at the all-Wales level, which was quite cheap and cheerful, really. In terms of monitoring and evaluating that TV campaign, we have had some really quite remarkable levels of engagement from parents. People remember that TV advert, and all the surveys are showing us that people are engaging with the message that it gives. Of course, the key actor in the drama is the school itself. There will be—and I do not think it is quite ready yet—a family engagement toolkit, which will be going out to schools very soon, so that no school is deprived of examples of best practice, ideas and evidence-based suggestions for what they should be doing. Of course, there will also be guidance to go along with that."

152. The Minister also referred to changes that had been made to school development plans in relation to this issue. He also referred to joint-working with Communities First projects:

"Those development plans have to incorporate plans around family and community engagement, which is a legal requirement of what

schools need to be planning for. In terms of at least some schools, we have a crossover with Communities First as well. A great number of Communities First schools are now employing family support officers. I have seen and spoken to a couple of these family support officers, who are remarkable people, actually, and are doing that very human job of face-to-face contact, quite often with very hard to reach parents and quite disengaged parents. They are doing fantastic things.”

153. In relation to the costs associated with education, the Minister’s evidence referred to a number of developments, including:

“As the committee has requested, the forthcoming Family and Community Engagement Toolkit for schools (and later, the Learning Pack) will make reference to these costs as one of the potential barriers to family engagement. The implementation plan will work to ensure that the message is also communicated to governing bodies.”

“In early 2015 we will be publishing guidance and resources for schools on enrichment activities that broaden the curriculum and engage pupils with learning and with school life, and where costs (of trips, sports equipment, music fees, after school clubs) often need to be met by parents. We will provide schools with evidence on the types of enrichment activities that are best able to improve educational and well-being outcomes for children from deprived backgrounds, and clearly set out their eligibility for PDG spend. [...] We will use this guidance as a further opportunity to make reference to the costs of education.”

154. The Minister also referred to the use of non-teaching staff, such as school liaison officers, as a link to the community and to promote engagement with the school:

“I think that it is worth delving into this and doing a piece of work in terms of just what kind of value for money such people provide—I am convinced that they do provide value for money—and what exactly the best practice is. Should we periodically get these professionals together, so that they can learn from each other and so on? At the moment, they are something of an anomaly in terms of the teaching family or the support family around the school. So, I take your point. They have evolved almost spontaneously out of the system, which is a good thing, but I think that it is probably now worth my department

taking a look in a structured way at how we can get even better value out of those examples.”

Committee’s view

155. One of the key messages emerging from this inquiry was that, no matter how ambitious a programme or policy, its impact will be limited without effective methods of delivery. We recognise the importance of school leadership for this agenda. We are concerned that since the creation of the consortia their roles in relation to local authorities may have led to a lack of clarity, particularly in relation to responsibility and accountability.

156. It will be difficult for schools alone to deliver change on the scale that is needed to close the attainment gap. We have heard extensive evidence that better engagement between schools and parents could, if harnessed correctly, contribute significantly to delivering the change needed. We heard some excellent examples of how this is taking place in primary and secondary schools in Wales. However, good practice is very inconsistent across Wales and, in some cases, parental engagement is non-existent.

157. The Committee welcomes the Minister’s commitment to parental engagement and welcomes the Welsh Government’s “Education begins at home” campaign and the publication the forthcoming “Family and Community Engagement Toolkit”. The challenge for the Welsh Government is to ensure that all governing bodies and in turn schools “buy in” to this agenda.

158. We were extremely concerned to hear evidence about the hidden costs of education. A number of examples were provided to the Committee, including one where a parent had spent a significant proportion of their family’s weekly food shopping budget on ingredients for their child to use in a Home Economics GCSE practical exam.

159. The Committee was also concerned to receive evidence that some schools are arranging overseas trips with negligible educational value. This Committee supports the use of school trips, but they should be demonstrably of educational value or contribute to the development of the pupil. We expect that, if a school trip is of educational value, no child should be prevented from participating because of cost.

160. There was a lack of clarity in communication with parents that certain payments were voluntary. The Minister should strengthen and clarify guidance for schools on charging for activities relating to education. The

Minister should explore the possibility of introducing statutory guidance, if he is not satisfied that current guidance has had the necessary effect.

161. Finally, the Committee noted the positive response received from parents to non-teaching staff, such as school liaison officers. They can play an important role, particularly in engaging with those hardest-to-reach families, by building relationships and trust. The Committee welcomes the Minister's commitment to undertake some work to explore the impact of such roles.

Recommendations

The Minister should strengthen and clarify guidance for schools on charging for activities relating to education. If the Minister is not satisfied that current guidance has had the necessary effect, he should introduce statutory guidance.

The Minister should issue guidance to schools to ensure that they make clear to parents the educational purposes of proposed school trips.

The Minister should report back to the Committee on his work to evaluate the use of non-teaching staff, such as school liaison officers.

The Minister should report back to the Committee within 6 months on the progress of initiatives to promote parental engagement, including the Family and Community engagement toolkit.

Annex A – Written evidence

The following people and organisations provided written evidence to the Committee. All written evidence can be viewed in full at:

www.senedd.assembly.wales/mglIssueHistoryHome.aspx?Ild=6996

Organisation	Reference
NUT Cymru	EO 01
Barnardos Cymru	EO 02
Communities and Schools Together (CaST Cymru)	EO 03
Governors Wales	EO 04
GL Assessment	EO 05
University and College Union	EO 06
Afasic Cymru	EO 07
End Child Poverty Network	EO 08
Children’s Commissioner	EO 09
Save the Children	EO 10
Save the Children – Travelling Ahead	EO 11
Estyn	EO 12
Undeb Cenedlaethol Athrawon Cymru (UCAC)	EO 13
Welsh Local Government Association	EO 14
The Bevan Foundation	EO 15
Professor David Egan	EO 16
Welsh Government	EO 17
People and Work Unit	EO 18
City University London	EO 19

Annex B – Oral evidence

The following witnesses provided oral evidence to the Committee on the dates noted below. Transcripts of all oral evidence sessions can be viewed in full at: www.senedd.assembly.wales/ieIssueDetails.aspx?IId=6996&Opt=3

14 November 2013

Ann Keane	HM Chief Inspector - Estyn
Meilyr Rowlands	Strategic Director – Estyn
Simon Brown	Strategic Director – Estyn
Professor David Egan	

20 November 2013

Victoria Winckler	Director – Bevan Foundation
Mary Powell-Chandler	Head of Wales – Save the Children
Trudy Aspinwall	Programme Officer – Travelling Ahead

28 November 2013

Committee Visit to Cadoxton Primary School

6 February 2014

Huw Lewis AM	Minister for Education and Skills
Emma Williams	Head of Support for Learners – Welsh Government
Jo-Anne Daniels	Director of Infrastructure, Curriculum, Qualifications and Learner Support – Welsh Government

20 February 2014

Visit to a centre in Caia Park Communities 1st in Wrexham

Visit to a family centre in an East cluster Communities 1st area in Swansea

5 March 2014

James Hall	Action Research Project Manager – People and Work Unit
Andrea Williams	Project Worker – People and Work Unit
Rachel Morris	Parent
Ann Broadway	Education Family Support Worker – Goetre Primary School
Kath Bevan	Head Teacher – Pillgwenlly Primary School
Bev Phillips	Head Teacher – Blaen y Maes Primary School

13 March 2014

Pam Boyd	Chief Executive - CaST Cymru
Dr Rachel Jones	Eirias High School
Mike Gibbon	Headteacher - Sandfields Comprehensive School
Karyn Keane	Head Teacher - Newport High School

3 December 2014

Huw Lewis AM	Minister for Education and Skills
Jo-Anne Daniels	Director - Infrastructure, Curriculum, Qualifications and Learner Support - Welsh Government
Emma Williams	Head of Support for Learners - Welsh Government
Brett Pugh	Director - School Standards and Workforce Group - Welsh Government