

Public Accounts Committee Inquiry into Looked After Children response from



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ABOUT THE CHARITY

FNF Both Parents Matter Cymru is a children's rights charity supporting parents and grandparents who are facing exclusion from the lives of the children they care about. Our work is underpinned by the UNCRC – specifically Articles 9.3 and 18.1

Our charity runs a telephone Helpline for parents and grandparents with child contact problems – receiving around 1000 calls per annum. We also help people at our monthly face to face support meetings that take place in 11 different locations across Wales from Bangor to Newport and Carmarthen to Queensferry attended by around 1100 people attend each year.

All of our meetings are registered with the Law Society's charity Law Works Cymru as Legal Advice Clinics where attendees can meet with a family law solicitor on a one to one basis to receive free specialist legal advice.

The charity also provides the Secretariat to the newly formed Cross Party Group on Fathers and Fatherhood in the Welsh Assembly.

In response to the needs of our service users the charity has launched a new service to support male victims of domestic violence and abuse on a pilot basis in the Ely area of Cardiff.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. We strongly welcome the Public Accounts Committee's interest in the area of Looked After Children as we believe it will bring an outcome focus to the issues that has been lacking despite rhetoric to the contrary.
2. We support the focus of the Inquiry based on the appropriate use of public funds to achieve the outcomes for Looked After Children & Young People (LACYP), and the concentration on educational attainment, foster placements and LA corporate parenting plans.
3. Success – both of the Inquiry and of support for LACYP will depend on creating a simple set of Outcome Measures capable of being monitored and understood by the general public. Each of these Outcome Measures must have a business plan

underpinning them with a finite budget. This will act as a driver to reduce the number of children taken into the care of Local Authorities on the simple basis that with fewer children in care the individual amount of money that can be spent on improving the Outcomes of each of them is greater. This is the key driver for change.

4. THE INQUIRY / THE ISSUES

5. Looked After Children and Young People are EVERYONES business in Wales. It is crucial that the success or failure of measures designed to improve their wellbeing outcomes should be public knowledge and openly discussed.
6. The former Minister, Mark Drakeford AM re-stated his position at the Family Justice Network Stakeholder meeting held in January 2016 saying
7. 'In Wales we take too many children into the care of Local Authorities'. In the following month – February 2016 – the number of applications to remove children from parents under s31 of the Children Act 1989 reached a record level (88) – greater than at the height of the Baby P case media attention. In the 18 months since that date the figure of 88 has been exceeded on 6 occasions – with a new record of 112 set in May 2016 and 100 applications in March 2017.
8. The Welsh Government in allowing children to be removed from their families by Local Authorities must be held accountable for the outcomes for those children across a wide range of performance measures.
9. Clearly the data that is available suggests that across many of those indicators eg educational attainment, wellbeing etc those outcomes are not being improved.
10. There is recognition of the inadequacies of the data collection by Welsh Government who stated that one of the key actions must be
11. ***'To review how the range of data on children who are looked after is collected and analysed to consolidate numerous datasets and reduce complexity. This will also include considering the availability of benchmarks and comparison across local authorities and regional education consortia.'***
12. We are aware of the Welsh Government's various plans to tackle the fundamental problem that outcomes for Looked After Children are often not improved after they have been removed from their parents. We note the Action Plan 2015-16 to raise ambition and educational attainment <http://gov.wales/docs/dcells/publications/160127-lac-action-plan-en.pdf> and the research and recommendations commissioned from CASCADE <http://gov.wales/docs/caecd/research/2015/151111-understanding-educational-experiences-opinions-looked-after-children-summary-en.pdf>
13. We have not yet seen the first report on the LACYP ACTION PLAN - <http://gov.wales/docs/dcells/publications/151218-easy-read-lac-strategy-en.pdf> which is due to be published in 2017.
14. There are many strong assertions that matters need to improve and responsibilities need to be met. What is lacking is the clarity of easily understood Outcome Measures linked to financial plans to drive change.

OUR PROPOSALS

We propose that the following actions be advocated for by the Committee

1. The creation of a transparent Results Based Accountability framework of Outcomes for Looked After Children that should have no more than 12 indicators
2. That each of the Outcomes measures has a business plan behind it with fully costed but finite financial resources in place
3. That the Inquiry specifically examines the underlying reasons for the increase in the number of applications for s31 care orders and the use of s76 (formerly s20) agreements in Wales since 2008/9 to examine the financial burden this has placed on Local Authorities.
4. That these Outcome measures be monitored regularly – preferably quarterly – to ensure that targets are met and the costs of doing so are also reported in a format capable of being understood by a wide cross section of the public
5. That the indicators and the monitoring data be published and promoted through a range of media to ensure a public focus on the problems faced by Looked After Children and Young People
6. That measures to reduce the number of applications for care orders be considered eg by placing a Welsh Government levy on s31 care applications of £10,000 which will be used to fund further improvements to the Outcome Measures set for LACYP.

PAUL APREDA

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