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Evaluation of the Welsh Child Poverty Strategy

SUMMARY OF MAIN REPORT



Evaluation of the Welsh Child Poverty Strategy: Summary of main report

Ipsos MORI and the New Policy Institute

Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government.

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Glossary of acronyms

Child Poverty Expert Group (CPEG)

Child Poverty Strategy (CPS)

Communities First (CF)

Cost benefit analysis (CBA)

Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA)

Free School Meal (FSM)

Great Britain (GB)

Households Below Average Income (HBAI)

Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS)

Integrated Family Support Service (IFSS)

Key Stage (KS)

Local Authority (LA)

Long-acting reversible contraception (LARC)

Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs)

Raising Achievement and Individual Standards in Education (RAISE)

Tackling Poverty Action Plan (TPAP)

Tackling Poverty External Advisory Group (TPEAG)

Tackling Poverty Team (TPT)

United Kingdom (UK)

Welsh European Funding Office (WEFO)

Summary

1. Eradicating child poverty by 2020 is a fundamental priority for the Welsh Government. Wales has a higher proportion of children living in poverty than England, Scotland or Northern Ireland, and a higher proportion than any English region outside of London. Following consultation work in 2010¹, the Welsh Government produced its first statutory Child Poverty Strategy (CPS) in February 2011. This aimed to provide clarity about the contribution that the Welsh Government would make to reducing child poverty, as well as to set the direction for effective local delivery arrangements. It built on the original 2005 Child Poverty Strategy² and reflected a new statutory framework of the Children and Families (Wales) Measure (2010) (referred to hereafter as 'the Measure') which placed a duty on a wide range of Public Bodies, as well as Welsh Ministers, to develop and implement Child Poverty Strategies.
2. In March 2012 Ipsos MORI and the New Policy Institute were commissioned by the Welsh Government to undertake an evaluation of the CPS in Wales. The overarching aim of the evaluation is to understand the impact of the Welsh Government's CPS on child poverty, but also importantly what impact the existence of a strategy has made on the actions of the Welsh Government and Public Bodies to reduce child poverty.
3. The methodology used to inform this evaluation of the CPS included:
 - a baseline report and update report (using data available as at 14 February 2014) measuring child poverty indicators in Wales, drawing comparisons to 2005 when the first CPS was introduced
 - consultations with Welsh Government stakeholders involved in the delivery of the Strategy, or of work that is relevant to the strategy, in June-July 2013, prior to the refreshed Tackling Poverty Action Plan

¹ Consultation Document: Child Poverty Strategy for Wales, Welsh Assembly Government, May 2010; And: Consultation Document: Child Poverty Strategy for Wales Delivery Plan, Welsh Assembly Government, May 2010.

² Welsh Assembly Government, *Child Poverty Strategy for Wales* (Merthyr Tydfil, 2011), accessed online on 24 December 2013 at <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/dsjlg/policy/110203newchildpovstrategy2en.pdf>.

(this evaluation does not cover all developments that have occurred since then)

- consultations with stakeholders in Local Authorities and other Public Bodies involved in the development and delivery of their organisations' Child Poverty Strategy, in November-December 2013
- a meta-review of the effectiveness and impact of a sample of key Welsh Government programmes, selected in 2012, whose aims are relevant to the three core objectives of the CPS (performance and impact data available as at 31 January 2014 included), and of lessons learned from the evaluations of these programmes (new policies and programmes are therefore not covered by this evaluation)
- an analysis of the costs and benefits of the programmes selected for the meta-review, where such data are available.

Headline conclusions

4. Positive steps have been taken by the Welsh Government since 2010 to reduce child poverty in Wales, and policies are now in place to support the tackling poverty objectives across the Welsh Government. The Programme for Government³ further reinforces the tackling poverty agenda by clearly recognising it as one of the Government's three key priorities. It also places an increased emphasis on measuring impact and capturing whether Welsh Government actions to tackle poverty are making a difference.
5. The effects of this elevation of tackling poverty concerns across Welsh Government can be seen at the level of increased emphasis on the agenda in Welsh Government departments, new programme design, and outputs being generated by programmes.
6. The Welsh Government is also using Results-Based Accountability™ across a number of its programmes, which has helped to clarify and emphasise the outcomes sought and how activities will lead to those outcomes. It is also important to note, however, that evidence at the level

³ <http://wales.gov.uk/about/programmeforgov/poverty/performance?lang=en>

of outcomes and impacts is yet to be realised and captured for some of the Welsh Government's activities.

7. Whilst Wales is seen to be ahead of a number of other UK regions / areas in terms of its approach to having a strategy for tackling child poverty, it is still lagging behind on key indicators. In general the programming which has been put in place under preventing poverty follows an 'invest to save' approach and is likely to generate results but not in the shorter term. Evidence from this evaluation suggests:

- That more could be done to link economic growth strategies with poverty objectives. For example job creation programmes need to focus more on those with low educational qualifications and skills (under the helping people out of poverty strand);
- There is no strong evidence that the scale of programming is enough to make the scale of change that is necessary; and
- The duty placed on Local Authorities and other Public Bodies has ensured that they have all developed Child Poverty Strategies, which was the principal aim of the duty. At the time of the research (November-December 2014), the Measure had had a very limited impact in terms of new programming or allocation of additional resources to meet child poverty aims (although these were not specific aims of the Measure). The measure encouraged Public Bodies to review their programming and assess it for gaps; in the vast majority of cases this process did not highlight any significant gaps, although a small number of Public Bodies have expanded existing activities, improved targeting to deprived children or begun to deliver new activities as a result of the Measure. The main impacts of the duty have been enhanced coordination between programmes and services at a local level, and improvements in monitoring systems.

Detailed conclusions

Child poverty in Wales

8. Child poverty in Wales is now higher than it was in 2005. This is driven in large part by a steep rise in the proportion of children in working families

who are in poverty. The choice of 2005 as a baseline year has an impact on the results⁴.

9. Using data available to 14 February 2014, most of the other indicators of work and worklessness also worsened between 2005 and 2012, except the lone parent employment rate which remained unchanged. Indicators of skills and qualifications and housing indicators show a mixed picture of improvement, while health indicators have mostly remained unchanged since 2005.
10. While the Welsh Government has more of the levers to improve the educational, health and economic outcomes of those households living in poverty, it lacks control over key aspects of macro-economic policy which are likely to influence child poverty rates. These include welfare policy, monetary policy and fiscal policy, though some devolution of the latter is on the horizon.

Impact of Welsh Government programming on child poverty in Wales

11. Evidence from the recently published Welsh Government Child Poverty Strategy Progress Report 2013⁵ provides detail as to the outputs delivered by programmes which have a focus on tackling poverty for children, young people and their families. This report highlights a number of achievements including but not limited to: assisted childcare places for disadvantaged children, how the link between Jobcentre Plus and Integrated Children's Centres is increasing referrals and that Jobcentre Advisors are meeting and exceeding their targets and delivering employment outcomes, jobs created for young people through the Jobs Growth Wales programme, and how Flying Start is on track to meeting targets for the number of families to which it provides support.
12. Beyond the output level data provided by programmes themselves, evidence on what has been produced under the strategy is variable and could be strengthened: some areas such as children and families and

⁴ 2005 was a 'good' year, with the lowest level of child poverty in Wales at any point in the last 15 years. If the year before or after was used as a comparison, the rise would have been smaller, however 2005 was the year in which strategy activities commenced hence the use of this baseline year.

⁵ <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/dsjlg/policy/131129child-poverty-strategy-progress-reportv2-en.pdf>

health have a stronger culture of conducting robust evaluations. However, evaluations are not always fit to feed into policy at the best times (or with the right level of rigour) which therefore limits what can be concluded about the impact under the strategy. This is the case for a number of reasons, including the way in which programmes are implemented (e.g. lack of comparison areas, beginning to implement the main stage of a programme before pilot evaluation findings are available). In terms of helping people into work the ability to unpick overarching impact is limited by the lack of evaluation at the level of 'Action Plans', 'Strategies' or 'Funds' – often evaluations and / or monitoring is conducted at the level of individual activities and is not considered as a whole.

13. Whilst the use of piloting phases is common across programmes this is not always being used to best effect. For example Flying Start was rolled out before evidence of impact in the pioneer areas was ascertained, as was IFSS and the Primary School Free Breakfast Initiative. In some cases more rigorous evaluation could have been used during the pilot phases so that the evidence on which decisions were made would be stronger: for example, the Families First pioneer evaluation was mostly qualitative in nature. There is a need for politicians, policy officials and analysts to work together to make sure learning from pilot phases is fed into programme roll-out and future programme design. Learning about what works from pioneer phases or predecessor programmes is rarely cascaded beyond the national level teams and the transfer of knowledge to local areas could be improved. Set against this are some examples of where piloting has been used well – such as the Access to Credit Unions programme.
14. The scale of what is being proposed and/or delivered in many policy areas will limit the extent to which any Wales-wide change at the level of population indicators will be seen. For example Flying Start, and the youth employment and skills programmes (including Jobs Growth Wales), are small in terms of the number of beneficiaries they are seeking to target compared to the scale of the issue they seek to address.
15. The evaluation team has not seen any evidence of significant coordination between programmes aiming to help people into work and programmes

aiming to create jobs. It is possible that this may limit what the second strand of the Tackling Poverty Action Plan (TPAP) can achieve.

16. The stakeholder consultations revealed a concern across a number of policy leads that the assumptions underpinning what is anticipated to be achieved under the strategy do not hold true. For example the role of the UK Government, the scale of the interventions and the difficult economic climate over the period 2008 to 2013 were unlikely to aid the successful realisation of the high level strategy outcomes (for example –the eradication of child poverty by 2020).

The impact of having a strategy

17. Evidence suggests that the 'strategy effect' does exist to some extent. This strategy effect has varied over time linked to the ministerial and external climate (e.g. EU funding priorities). These effects have been significantly enhanced recently by Ministerial communicated priorities. In the main, the strategy forms a useful narrative around what the Welsh Government and the distinct policy teams are seeking to achieve, and as a useful mechanism internally when seeking to highlight the potential contribution a policy team's work will make and externally to stakeholders about the focus and contribution of the Welsh Government. The strategy was also a useful tool for justifying protection of certain programmes such as the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), free swimming lessons and entry to museums, etc. In addition, the strategy's existence has encouraged policy teams to focus targeting on those who are living with the effects of poverty.
18. The Tackling Poverty Team (TPT) has had a strong role in linking up some of the programmes which should enhance overall impact and value for money – the area of most progress related to Communities First and other programming work. It was considered that this could be done more systematically and that the TPT could play a key role here. There is also a greater role for the TPT to play in the policy review process, setting evaluation targets and monitoring frameworks (to ensure that policies and programmes are considering impact in terms of improving the outcomes of low income families).

19. Tackling Poverty Champions have been put in place across Welsh Government departments and this has helped to enhance the visibility of poverty as a key pillar of Welsh Government's mandate. However as of July 2013 their specific role as a Champion was unclear. More recent work by the TPT has provided greater clarity and focus around these roles.
20. The term of the Child Poverty Expert Group (CPEG), initially appointed in April 2008, ended in May 2011. The group aimed to identify the priorities and challenges that needed to be addressed to tackle child poverty in Wales. CPEG provided evidence-based recommendations for consideration by Welsh Government Ministers. CPEG also considered and commented on the progress of the Welsh Government in the attainment of its child poverty targets, and provided expert advice on the implementation of child poverty legislation, the Child Poverty Strategy for Wales and other relevant documents. During its term, the group developed specific policy recommendations on a number of poverty-related themes and was involved in the development of the Children & Families (Wales) Measure 2010 and peer reviewing the draft CPS and Delivery Plan for Wales, among other work.
21. The Tackling Poverty External Advisory Group (TPEAG) was established by the current Welsh Government and first met in July 2012. The TPEAG meets quarterly and reports to the Minister for Communities and Tackling Poverty and the Deputy Minister for Tackling Poverty. The remit of this group is broader than that of the CPEG as it reflects the wider poverty agenda as defined in the TPAP. The TPEAG provides expert, evidence-based advice to the Welsh Government on the implementation and further policy requirements necessary to deliver the TPAP in Wales. The TPEAG also considers and comments on the progress of the Welsh Government in the attainment of its tackling poverty targets as set out in Programme for Government and the TPAP.
22. In recent months, there has been a shift in priorities in some policy areas, such as education, skills and regeneration, in line with the importance placed on the TPAP and the outcomes it hopes to achieve being better integrated in these areas. Furthermore, a Tackling Poverty Implementation Board has been established (which is chaired by the Deputy Minister for

Tackling Poverty). The Implementation Board monitors delivery of the commitments in the TPAP, and is the mechanism for holding different departments to account for the key targets and milestones contained within the TPAP.

Impact of the Measure on Public Bodies

23. Prior to the Measure being introduced, all Public Bodies were delivering services that contributed in some way towards tackling child poverty. However, Public Bodies varied in the extent to which child poverty was considered a priority and the level of coordination of services contributing to tackling child poverty. Some already had a dedicated person or team in place, while others did not have specific aims or teams but simply contributed to reducing child poverty by delivering their statutory duties.
24. Interpreting what was required of them under the Measure was not an issue for most Public Bodies. They used the legislation itself to understand this, and some also drew on the guidance issued by the Welsh Government as well as the advice of Welsh Government officials. Many did comment on the level of ambiguity in the legislation about what they were required to do, but were divided on whether they saw this positively or negatively. Most felt that it left too much room for interpretation and was not clear enough about what action was required, and specifically what outcomes it was seeking to achieve. A small number, however, were positive about it enabling them to tailor their response to the needs and priorities of their local area.
25. Most Public Bodies stated that the introduction of the Measure did not cause them to introduce new services or programmes or to increase the amount of funding allocated to child poverty programmes (although these were not specific aims of the Measure). The Measure did, however, lead to the profile of child poverty as an issue being raised within Public Bodies, and this gave individuals and teams promoting the cause more leverage over other departments and external partner organisations to support child poverty initiatives. It has also led to a greater level of coordination among programmes with child poverty-related objectives, in part because of the mapping exercise Public Bodies carried out in developing their strategies,

and through more coordinated monitoring systems. A small number of Public Bodies have made changes in services, such as targeting more deprived groups or modifying programme content. Finally, a small number are dedicating a modest additional amount of resources to programmes aimed at tackling child poverty, and many are funding staff to spend more time on the issue.

26. Improving monitoring and evaluation systems has become a priority for many Public Bodies as a result of the requirement to review progress by March 2014 and every three years thereafter. Public Bodies vary substantially in the quality of their monitoring systems, with the spectrum ranging from those that only measure programme outputs, to those that are attempting to measure impact and value for money.

Key learning points

27. Learning point 1: If the Welsh Government seeks to draw conclusions on the extent to which it is delivering on high level policy objectives – such as tackling child poverty, a more systematic approach to evaluation will be necessary. This should mean:

- a. Clearly articulating the vision and objectives of each programme and how they relate to wider Welsh Government policy objectives,
- b. Earlier planning of evaluations alongside the design of the initial policy / programme⁶,
- c. Use of methodologies and staging in evaluations which will allow for early / preliminary conclusions to be drawn and intermediary net outcomes to be measured as well as value for money assessments⁷,
- d. Overarching meta-evaluation frameworks to be applied in the process of aligning programmes / policies into common strategies / funds or action plans,

⁶ Close working between politicians, policy officials and analysts within government, with support from external experts as appropriate, is crucial and the earlier this happens the greater the range of evaluation options that will be available. This will help to ensure that the best possible evaluation design can be employed in order to provide robust evidence on whether, and why, a programme is working or not.

⁷ Value for Money assessments are critical elements for evaluations which were often found lacking from the current portfolio of Welsh Government evaluations.

- e. Giving more consideration to investing in evaluation as an integral part of programme budgets.
28. Learning point 2: Evidence about ‘what works’ for programming seeking to contribute to tackling poverty in Wales and the management of this knowledge could be improved through more rigorous and timely pilot stage evaluation. This learning could be used to greater effect if shared more proactively locally. Lessons from the use of learning sets as part of Families First could be used to improve / build national-to-local knowledge sharing processes for key policies.
29. Learning point 3: Evidence about what works should be gathered and used to scale activity up or down in key policy areas. Currently the evidence of what is producing outcomes is limited. The scale of activity is often disproportionately low compared to to the scale of the problem. On the other hand, commissioners should be willing to reduce funding to programmes which due to changes in the environment no longer need higher levels of funding, and to discontinue funding to those that are assessed not to provide good value for money.
30. Learning point 4: As child poverty cannot be addressed by one programme alone, integrating programmes with complementary services, and with upstream and downstream provision to ensure a continuum of support for children and families, without duplicating existing provision, is essential. The Welsh Government is already taking steps to ensure better join-up of tackling poverty programmes, including Communities First, Flying Start and Families First, from the highest level (bringing all these programmes together into a single government department) and on the ground. However, more could be done to ensure better alignment with mainstream services such as health.
31. Learning point 5: The role of the TPT could be enhanced to improve the impact on policy design, implementation and evaluation. In particular it is recommended that the team focus in the short term on improvement of the evidence base being generated within Welsh Government by engaging in design, tendering and steering evaluation contracts. An improved evidence base would enhance future programming and resource allocation

decisions and enable broader sharing of 'what works' in tackling poverty across Wales.

32. Learning point 6: Sharing experience and good practice of what works well at a local level may enhance the impact of the duty on Local Authorities and Public Bodies. The Welsh Government is already taking steps to do this, such as through planned 'Tackling Poverty Regional Events' which will take place in March and April 2014, and will bring together Anti-Poverty Champions to discuss reducing the number of NEETs and low birth-weight babies.
33. Learning point 7: The importance of leadership from the highest levels of the Welsh Government has been highlighted throughout this evaluation. Tackling poverty being a priority of the First Minister and included as one of the three key aims in the Programme for Government has been immensely important for raising the profile of this issue and giving individuals working at various levels leverage to tackle child-poverty-related problems.