



Jenny Rathbone MS

Chair

Equality and Social Justice Committee

Senedd Cymru

Cardiff Bay

CF99 1SN

10 November 2023

Dear Jenny,

I'm writing in response to the publication of the recent committee report on child poverty – 'Calling time on child poverty – how Wales can do better'. We were extremely pleased to read the strong report recommendations around the need to set targets, deliver an action plan and focus the strategy much more closely on children's rights. We are fully in agreement that there should be a dedicated Minister responsible for Babies, Children and Young People to improve co-ordination across government departments. We particularly welcome the recommendations that the Welsh Government should commit to funding seamless and affordable childcare provision and prioritise programmes where there is clear evidence that they are effective at reducing child poverty.

It is a matter of significant concern to us as a college that the draft child poverty strategy does not reference the Welsh Government 'Talk with Me Speech, Language and Communication Delivery Plan' given the strong relationship between poverty and poorer early language skills. Language skills are a critical factor in the intergenerational cycles that can perpetuate poverty (Hart et al,2003). Not all children have the speech, language, and communication skills they need to fully engage with their education. It is estimated that 10% of all children in the UK have long-term, persistent speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) (Norbury et al,2016). Research shows that there is a strong correlation however between poverty and delayed language. By which we mean, those children whose language skills are developing significantly more slowly than those of other children

of the same age but who do not have a specific disorder. Studies of whole populations reveal a clear social gradient for language development, with children from the most disadvantaged groups more likely to have weaker language skills than those in more advantaged groups (Law et al, 2013).

Key statistics

- Over **50%** of children in socially deprived areas may start school with impoverished speech, language and communication skills (Locke et al, 2002).
- On average children from the poorest **20%** of the population are over **17 months** behind a child in the highest income group in language development at age three (Save the Children, 2014).
- Vocabulary at age 5 has been found to be the best predictor (from a range of measures at age 5 and 10) of whether children who experienced social deprivation in childhood were able to 'buck the trend' and escape poverty in later adult life⁷. Researchers have found that, after controlling for a range of other factors that might have played a part (mother's educational level, overcrowding, low birth weight, parent a poor reader, etc), **children who had normal non-verbal skills but a poor vocabulary at age 5 were at age 34 one and a half times more likely to be poor readers or have mental health problems and more than twice as likely to be unemployed as children who had normally developing language at age 5** (Blanden, 2006).

Welsh Government is leading the way across the UK in taking a strategic approach to improving the speech, language and communication (SLC) skills of our youngest children to maximise their life chances. Due to the strong evidence on the relationship between disadvantage and early language delay, the Flying Start programme has prioritised speech, language and communication from its inception as one of the four key pillars of the programme with speech and language therapists employed at every Flying Start team. There is strong and consistent evidence to suggest the impact of the investment in speech and language therapists in Flying Start areas.

The pioneering preventative Talk With Me programme has developed an awareness raising campaign resulting in increased awareness of the importance of speech, language and communication (SLC) and how to support SLC development amongst parents. The team have also developed training packages for professionals such as health visitors and early years staff and Welsh Government have invested £1.5m in the development of a bespoke bilingual SLC screening tool for Wales to help early identification of children at risk of long-term speech, language and communication needs (SLCN).

We believe these developments should be explicitly acknowledged within the plan and further actions included within the final version of the strategy as part of a holistic approach to reducing child poverty over the longer-term. These should include a commitment to expand all elements of Flying Start including SLC and agreement on the future of the Talk With Me delivery plan (expansion to cover more areas and a wider age-range) and the secondment of speech and language therapists into government.

With regards your recommendation around seamless and affordable childcare provision, we would stress that it is essential that the strategy recognises the impact of **high-quality** early childhood education and care (ECEC) in levelling up socioeconomic inequalities from both the perspective of the parent and the child. Early years practitioners have a crucial role in supporting children's

development and in closing the language gap between children from higher and lower income families, which begins in infancy, promoting social mobility and offering children the best start in life. As a key element of high-quality formal childcare provision, all early years' practitioners need to have the requisite skills, knowledge, confidence and attitudes to promote language development, and identify and support children with speech, language and communication needs.

We hope the information provided in this letter is of interest to the committee. Please do contact us if it would be helpful to have a further discussion about our comments. We look forward to the upcoming Senedd debate on the report.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'P. Cotterill', is centered on the page.

Pippa Cotterill

Head of Wales Office