

NSPCC Cymru/Wales

Response to:

Welsh Assembly Government's Ten Year Homelessness Plan 2009 -2019

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About us:

The NSPCC's purpose is to end cruelty to children. Our vision is of a society where all children are loved, valued and able to fulfil their potential.

We seek to achieve cultural, social and political change – influencing legislation, policy, practice, attitudes and behaviours for the benefit of children and young people. This is achieved through a combination of service provision, lobbying, campaigning and public education.

General

NSPCC Cymru/Wales welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation on the Welsh Assembly Government's Ten Year Homelessness Plan.

We welcome the specific section relating to youth homelessness within the plan and also the reference to the impact that experiencing domestic abuse has on the physical and emotional development of children and young people. We also welcome the specific reference to children and young people as a priority group in relation to improving health and wellbeing. We share the view in the action plan that the challenge for Wales in relation to youth homelessness lies with ensuring a joined up, multi-agency approach to tackling youth homelessness, including identifying those most at risk and intervening as early as possible.

It is positive that the recently published *2008 Children and Young People's Well-being Monitor for Wales* indicated that homeless households with dependent children have been steadily reducing since the high point in 2005-06. In saying this the monitor also highlights that Wales has the second highest annual rate of youth homelessness (8.2%) among the UK nations and that whilst the number has now dropped it rose between 2005-06 and 2006-07. This clearly demonstrates that youth homelessness is a significant issue in Wales, as the statistics are developed from young people's contact with statutory agencies. We know that many children and young people who are homeless will avoid contact with the authorities for fear of being returned to the home situation they have often run away from.

Since February 2006 NSPCC has delivered the ChildLine service across Wales, Northern Ireland, Scotland (in partnership with Children 1st) and England. In December 2007 we launched a ChildLine Casenote on the subject of running away and homelessness. The Casenote series seeks to raise particular issues that children and young people contact ChildLine about and looks to make policy recommendations based on the evidence we receive from the calls. In 2006/07 4,365 children and young people called ChildLine either to specifically talk about running away (2,304) or mentioned it as an additional issue to the one they were calling about (2,061). A further 3,628 children and young people, 2,724 as a specific issue and 904 as an additional issue, contacted us to talk about homelessness. The most common reason given for running away was an inability to get along with their parents or carers. The majority of calls about homelessness spoke about the inability of their parents to control their tempers. The Casenote demonstrates some of the vulnerable situations that children and young people who run away or end up homeless can get themselves into. The full Casenote can be accessed via:

http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/publications/Serials/ChildLineCasenotes/runningaway_wda53975.html

The estimated scale of running away in Wales and some of the reasons and experiences of children and young people have been captured in a research report commissioned by the Welsh Assembly Government and published in May 2002 entitled *Running Away in Wales: Patterns, needs and services* (Wade et al 2002)¹

It is vitally important that any strategy that seeks to reduce youth homelessness also links with any strategy to support those who have run away from home. Within this action plan there is no mention of the link between children and young people who repeatedly run away, be it from care or their home, and the increased likelihood that these children and young people will end up in vulnerable situations on the streets across Wales.

NSPCC Cymru/Wales would recommend a more explicit link within this action plan to guidance and strategy in place around children and young people who have run away, in order to prevent them becoming homeless and ensure that there is early identification of their needs and higher risk.

Whilst recognising the specific section relating to youth homelessness we have sought in our response to comment under the relevant specific headings within the plan, raising

¹ This report can be downloaded via: <http://www.york.ac.uk/inst/spru/research/pdf/running.pdf>

issues relevant to those children and young people who run away from home and also those who find themselves homeless.

Introduction

NSPCC Cymru/Wales welcomes the strategic aims of the plan and also the commitment under the section relating to youth homelessness to involving children and young people in the delivery of support services for them. We believe that the involvement of children and young people is vital in the design and delivery of both frontline services for this group and also in the development of preventative approaches. This also fits with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) that lays out every child's right to have a say in the decisions that affect their life.

Whilst welcoming the commitment of the action plan to involve children and young people, we were disappointed to note the lack of reference to the Welsh Assembly Government's children and young people's policy framework or the UNCRC in the introduction and particularly the sections relating to "Working Across Organisational and Policy Boundaries" and "Delivering our Equality and Social Inclusion Objectives". There is no reference to *Children and Young People: Rights to Action*² or the Welsh Assembly Government's Seven Core Aims, which form the basis for all policy relating to children and young people in Wales and are directly based on the articles of the UNCRC. Core Aim 6 refers to every child and young person having the right to "a safe home and community which supports physical and emotional wellbeing".

By including this context the action plan provides a clearer connection with other policies and strategies relating to children and young people and makes clear that these rights are universal and include those who have been or are homeless.

NSPCC Cymru/Wales would recommend that the final action plan contains specific reference to the UNCRC and the rights to protection and a safe home enshrined within it and also reference to the Welsh Assembly Government's Seven Core Aims for Children and Young People, particularly Core Aim 6.

Preventing Homelessness

NSPCC Cymru/Wales would like to reiterate the importance of viewing children and young people who runaway persistently from their parents and carers as at higher risk of becoming homeless at an earlier stage of life. Over half of the young people who contacted ChildLine about being homeless said that they had been thrown out by their parent and carer. A significant number of these young people spoke about experiencing abusive or neglectful situations at home as well as experiencing issues such as parental substance misuse. These situations were broadly similar in children and young people who ran away or were considering doing so.

We welcome the acknowledgement in the section relating to youth homelessness that education institutions play a key role in providing children and young people with advice about how to avoid being made homeless and agencies that can provide support. It is vital that children and young people are made aware of services that can provide them with help, support and advice at an early stage, to prevent a situation potentially escalating to the point where they feel they have no option other than to run away or they are thrown out by their parents or carers.

NSPCC Cymru/Wales would further welcome specific reference to Flagged Action 2.55 of the *National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Service in Wales*, which reads:

School children are informed of the availability, purpose and access routes to services that are in place to protect them from harm, including ChildLine, the NSPCC Child Protection Helpline, social services, the Children's Commissioner for Wales and advocacy services

² <http://new.wales.gov.uk/topics/childrenyoungpeople/childrenfirst/publications/rightstoaction?lang=en>

From the limited information we have been able to access we understand that this is an action that local authorities have struggled to implement satisfactorily, although we accept that this may have improved in the last twelve months. It is crucial that when children and young people are experiencing distress they are aware of services that they can contact to talk through their worries or problems. Frequently when a child or young person calls ChildLine it is the first time they have spoken to anyone about their problem. Some children and young people want the opportunity to speak to someone anonymously and who is in no way connected to the situation they are experiencing. The call could help a child or young person begin to look at the options available to them and to access support at an earlier stage.

NSPCC Cymru/Wales recommends that the Welsh Assembly Government reviews the delivery of flagged action 2.55 of the NSF and includes the delivery of this action within this action plan under Objective 1 or Objective 2.

Improving Health and Wellbeing

NSPCC Cymru/Wales welcomes the stated objective in this section that children and young people should be considered a priority group. As we have already stated a significant number of children and young people who are homeless have either been thrown out of home or are running away from an abusive situation. This already makes them vulnerable and often unable to access the help and support they need. If access to service is to be improved there needs to be a clear link within this section made to the Welsh Assembly Government's Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services Strategy *Everybody's Business*³. Whilst children and young people who are homeless are not listed specifically within the strategy as a group posing particular challenges, many will fit within those categories listed. NSPCC Cymru/Wales remains concerned that without a significant increase in resources CAMHS in Wales will continue to struggle to meet the needs of children and young people in Wales including those who have been made homeless.

There should also be a link to the *National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services in Wales*⁴, as again whilst children and young people who find themselves homeless are not specifically listed in Chapter 6: Children and Young People in Special Circumstances, the experiences that may have contributed to them being homeless or running away would mean they fit under this section.

NSPCC Cymru/Wales recommends that a clear link in this section is made not only with *Everybody's Business*, but also with the *NSF for Children, Young People and Maternity Services in Wales*. The Welsh Assembly Government should ensure that appropriate resource is provided to CAMHS across Wales to meet the needs of this group of children and young people.

Supporting People

Further to the comments above there are specific actions within the NSF that relate to homeless families and young people who may be at risk, which are:

6.8 Local authority housing departments and social services ensure that vulnerable young people such as care leavers, travellers, asylum seekers and those leaving the Youth Justice System are housed in appropriate accommodation.

6.9 Homeless families with children are not placed in bed and breakfast accommodation, except in emergencies. Where bed and breakfast is the only available option, WAG will introduce legislation to end long term placement including a two week limit on the use of basic standard bed and breakfast hotels before suitable alternatives are offered.

The first of these actions is a flagged action for completion within 12 months of the NSF being published in 2006. It would be beneficial if the strategy referenced these two

³ <http://new.wales.gov.uk/topics/childrenyoungpeople/publications/strategicplans/childadomentalhealthservices/?lang=en>

⁴ <http://www.wales.nhs.uk/sites3/Documents/441/EnglishNSF%5Famended%5Ffinal.pdf>

specific actions and provided an update on whether they are being consistently delivered. Action 6.8 in particular would ensure that young people who may be more vulnerable to homelessness are provided with appropriate accommodation early on, which may help to prevent homelessness at a later stage.

NSPCC Cymru/Wales recommends that clear reference is made to Actions 6.8 and 6.9 of the *NSF for Children, Young People and Maternity Services in Wales* in this action plan.

Addressing Rough Sleeping

NSPCC Cymru/Wales agrees with the assertion within this section that rough sleeping has “proven one of the hardest aspects of homelessness to measure and tackle”. When considering young people sleeping rough this can be even more difficult as often they will do everything to avoid coming to the attention of statutory professionals as they fear being returned home to whatever situation they were trying to escape from. As one young person in the Casenote puts it:

I'm scared to be on the streets, but I've got nowhere else to go. Sleeping rough is bad, but home is worse (Polly, 12)

Careful thought needs to be given to how to work with young people who are sleeping rough. The Casenote also demonstrates how some young people end up sleeping rough because they feel they have overstayed their welcome at friends or families homes.

Mum threw me out last month. I went to live with Dad, but then he got sent to prison, so now I'm at my cousin's, but I know I'm in the way. I want to offer to leave, but I've got nowhere to go (Nicki, 14)

In particular we would like to see the Welsh Assembly Government explore the provision of emergency refuge accommodation for young people, somewhere they could go for a short period of time that would allow them to be safe and to speak to somebody about their problems and why they have either run away or been made homeless. This short term intervention could provide valuable space and time to begin to look at options for a young person and look at exploring the reasons behind their decisions. This would also provide a more suitable and accessible alternative to current out-reach and drop-in services, which may be more directed towards adults.

NSPCC Cymru/Wales recommends that this action plan includes a commitment to exploring the current provision of emergency refuge accommodation for children and young people in Wales and makes a further commitment to ensuring that if a young person is homeless appropriate outreach support is provided.

Reducing Youth Homelessness and Supporting Care Leavers

As we stated at the beginning of our response we welcome the specific recognition of this group as being particularly vulnerable. We firmly believe that more work needs to be undertaken to look at the needs of this group and we welcome the focus on involving children and young people in the planning and delivery of services in this area. It is vital in this section to also note that whilst official statistics place young people as a significant part of the homeless population it is possible that these figures could be higher due to the fear some young people may have of being returned to an abusive situation so they try to stay out of contact with statutory services and professionals. NSPCC Cymru/Wales would take this opportunity to re-highlight the recommendation above in relation to the statement in this section acknowledging that young people may “leave their childhood home in an unplanned way, perhaps due to family conflict. They may then lack family support or anywhere to return to in a crisis”. This is completely accurate and provides a case for ensuring emergency refuge accommodation is available to young people who need it. Further to this there is a need to ensure that issues such as substance misuse and sexual exploitation are clearly highlighted and that multi-professional working is actively being encouraged and delivered on the ground.

Preventing Homelessness from Domestic Abuse

NSPCC Cymru/Wales welcomes the inclusion of the *All Wales National Strategy: Tackling Domestic Abuse – A Joint Agency Approach* in this section and the recognition that there is a need to improve services to children and young people among others. The NSPCC Centre for UK-wide Learning in Child Protection, based at Edinburgh University, was funded by the Scottish Executive and commissioned by Scottish Women's Aid to produce a report entitled *The support needs of children and young people who have to move home because of domestic abuse*, the summary and full report can be downloaded via:

<http://www.clicp.ed.ac.uk/publications/reports.html>

This report, whilst it spoke to children and young people in Scotland, highlights some of the difficulties, both physical and emotional, that children and young people go through when leaving a home where domestic abuse has occurred. Some of those who participated in the research had one or two moves, others had up to eight, which demonstrates how temporary they can feel and how easily this group could slip into homelessness or at the very least a transitory existence. The report also highlights the importance of viewing children and young people in these situations as "active decision makers in their own lives", in as much as they have lived in these abusive situations, have coping mechanisms and have opinions around what should happen next. It is vital that re-housing services take these into account. The recommendations of this report should be considered jointly in this strategy and also the Welsh Assembly Government domestic abuse strategy to ensure there is a clear understanding of the needs of children and young people when an adult is fleeing a domestic abuse situation.

NSPCC Cymru/Wales recommends that in this section there is a clear explanation of the emotional barriers a child or young person may encounter when being forced to flee an abusive situation and that training should be made available for all re-housing professionals to ensure that children and young people's views are taken into account.

NSPCC Cymru/Wales believes that the other major issue within this section is that of young men aged between 16 and 18. Often refuges will not accept this age range and this places them in a difficult position, as they may have to remain in the abusive household or find alternative accommodation. Significantly more needs to be undertaken to ensure that this group of young people are able to access safe accommodation and someone to speak to about the situation they have experienced. It may be that the young person feels guilty at an inability to protect the abused parent or has been encouraged or threatened/forced by the perpetrator to be abusive as well. These situations can lead to conflicting emotions and the ability to talk about their experiences and how they felt coerced into action is extremely important.

NSPCC Cymru/Wales would recommend as part of this action plan and in partnership with the domestic abuse strategy there is urgent consideration around what provision is available for 16 plus young men who have left home with a parent following domestic abuse. This should include temporary refuge accommodation and support programmes.

Conclusion

NSPCC Cymru/Wales broadly welcomes the framework for the action plan and its acknowledgement that children and young people are a key vulnerable group. We would hope that the Welsh Assembly Government can ensure that this action plan is effectively linked into any guidance or strategy relating to runaways and that there is due reference to this as a trigger issue for homelessness. We would be happy to discuss further any points raised within this response.

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