

A call to prioritise services for **disabled children**

Services for disabled children in Wales are not reaching minimum standards. In a recent self assessed audit of the Children's National Service Framework, services for disabled children scored the lowest and were well below meeting minimum targets. Steve Beyer and Zoe Richards argue that, whilst policies are in place to ensure services reach best possible outcomes, unless the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) recognises that disabled children should be a priority and back the implementation of policies with a committed funding strategy over the next three years, fears are that there will be no improvement in the services delivered to disabled children.

The Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) has issued a number of policies and reports that express high aspirations for the rights of disabled children. These include the National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services in Wales; Rights in Action (action on United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child); Extending Entitlement (having the same rights and opportunities); A Fair Future for our Children (tackling child poverty). In relation to children with learning disabilities and their families, these represent important interventions, particularly in the areas of early intervention, communication, personal care, and transition arrangements. A number of reviews have also highlighted gaps in opportunity, service provision and quality for disabled

children in Wales, not least monitoring the failure to progress NSF targets since their introduction in 2005. Clearly there is work to be done for young disabled young people in Wales.

Additional funding

In England, revenue funding of £340 million was allocated in 2007 to implement the report "Aiming High for Disabled Children", part of the wider Policy Review of Children and Young People. There was a "Barnett formula consequential" of £21 million extra funding for Wales from this change in English expenditure. However, under devolution there is no absolute requirement that this be used in the same way as the original expenditure. When the draft WAG budget was produced there was no ring-fencing of the £21

million for disabled children, Ministers arguing exactly that devolution did not require them to follow England, and it was for them to decide the on the priorities for spending this money.

Campaign

Learning Disability Wales, Children in Wales, Mencap Cymru and Contact a Family Wales, with the support of 21 other organisations, formed the Disabled Children Matter Wales (DCMW) campaign to improve services for disabled children in Wales. In particular they wanted the £21 million for this purpose as without adequate funding all the worthy aspirations in policy Welsh documents were worth little. The campaigns aims were: to get disabled children and their families: the right information at the right time; a real choice of



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quality education; the health services they need to lead an ordinary life; full access to play and leisure activities; a real say in planning the services they receive; full access to community facilities; and enough money to live on.

Political Pressure

The campaign briefed AMs on the implications of not directing this money as it had been in England. It was successful in drawing many signatures from the public and, crucially, was able to gain the support of Lynne Neagle AM. She drafted a "statement of opinion" that drew upon recent results of self-assessments of Children's NSF for 2006/07 that highlighted that services for disabled children were consistently the weakest area of service delivery across Wales. The statement called for the consequential budget to be ring fenced in Wales for the

improvement of disabled children's services. With the campaigns support, the document eventually drew signatures from the vast majority of AM, other than those who could not sign because of ministerial positions. This was unprecedented and created significant political pressure on the WAG to change course.

One practical problem was that, given the recent re-structuring of WAG departments and responsibilities, issues concerning disabled children and young people cut across Health and Social Services, Social Justice and Local Government and Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills departmental briefs. At first there was no-one minister who would, or could, provide leadership in securing the funding so desperately needed within the draft budget.

Taking a lead

The first victory was that Jane Hutt, the Children's Minister, stepped forward and, with agreement from her ministerial colleagues, took the lead on disabled children's issues. A heated debate on the statement of opinion led to WAG producing a written statement highlighting their commitment to disabled children over the next year. They announced new expenditure of £1 million in the next financial year for early support materials, and £225,000 for personal care facilities in five major venues (both NSF goals) and the promise of changes to planning legislation to improve facilities in future developments. In addition, they announced that £1 million would be found to extend existing opportunities for integrated play whose funding was due to end this financial year. A Ministerial

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task group, including all four primary partners in DCMW, was convened to bring forward costed proposals for the next three years to deliver all of the goals highlighted by the campaign. The benefits to children with learning disabilities are likely to be significant. Integrated play is crucial to many as the first steps to social inclusion. Well planned care facilities in public venues will help many families whose child has a developmental delay to use the places we are all able to.

A Victory

This has been a victory for the voluntary sector organisations that master-minded the campaign. It has also highlighted a number of important lessons:

- 1) That monitoring what happens on the ground and comparing it to the policy aspiration, as in the case of the Children's NSF self-monitoring and reporting process, is hugely important if you want to hold government to account.
- 2) The voluntary sector supporting people with disabilities cannot move forward by assuming that if a policy is created in one arm

of government, the case for change or improvement is self-evident, that politicians from other parts of government will understand the issues involved, and that they will support money to deliver them in a non-partisan way.

- 3) That you have not won when government write a policy, but only when they assign enough money to it for it to be delivered.
- 4) If government gives money to local authorities and other agencies, it is by no means certain that they will use it in the way intended.
- 5) That ultimately politicians do control what is done, and how it is funded, and those who work with and for people with disabilities must challenge them with the consequences of their actions

WAG have proved that they are indeed responsive to local community and local wishes in Wales, and that just being different from England is not always the best policy. The DCMW campaign

continues, and they are re-focussing their work on politicians and officers at local level to ensure that the policies, and the money, handed down to them from WAG are in turn written into local children's plans and thereby delivered on the ground. We shall see how responsive local politicians are to the needs of disabled children in their areas.

Go to www.dcmw.org.uk/ for more information on the Disabled Children Matter Wales campaign.

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Disabled Children Matter Wales
Plant Anabl yn Cyfri Cymru

