

Lecture

Observatory on Human Rights of Children annual lecture

Huw Irranca–Davies, Minister for Children, Older people and Social Care. Lecture at Swansea University, Singleton Campus. Thursday 4 October 2018.

Introduction

Athro Evans. Diolch am y cyflwyniad ac eich geiriau caredig.

Rydw yn ddiolchgar i'r Arsyllfa yma ym Mhrifysgol Abertawe am eich gwaith yn yr ardal hon ac am y cyfle i siarad â chi am bwysigrwydd Hawliau Plant.

Professor Evans, thank you for your kind words of introduction.

I'm grateful to the Observatory here at Swansea University for your work in this area and the opportunity to speak to you about the importance of Children's Rights.

This is something I am passionate about and that Welsh

Government has been passionate about since the beginning.

During the very first Assembly term the Government adopted the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) as the basis for its work for children. The fundamental principles agreed then are as relevant today as they were 20 years ago.

It is this commitment to children's rights which provides a firm foundation for each and every child to receive the best possible start to life.

I'm proud that Wales led the way on children's rights; enshrining them in law through The Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011 - the first country in the UK to do so. This means Ministers, like me, must have due regard to the UNCRC when making decisions that affect children.

Let me be absolutely clear. Children's rights are a fundamental entitlement; not an optional extra.

There are many areas of policy that impact on children's lives, so I have personally written to all my Cabinet and Ministerial colleagues highlighting the importance of keeping children's rights at the centre of the work that we do.

And I know that children's rights are being taken seriously across the Welsh Government. Recent examples of good practice include the Ministerial focus on children's mental health and wellbeing and universal support for children through the Healthy Child Wales programme. This is in addition to the approaches to planning and environmental issues that take the needs of children into consideration.

To help reinforce our legislation the Children's Commissioner for Wales acts as an independent champion of children's rights in Wales. One of the Commissioner's key roles is to holding government to account, a tradition which continues to be upheld by the current Commissioner, Professor Sally Holland.

Article 12 of the UNCRC recognises the rights of children and young people to have a say in decisions which affect them. So a

really practical way in which we do this is through listening to them. We are committed to ensuring children and young people are full and active citizens in Wales who's views are taken into account when we are making policy.

One way we ensure children's voices are heard is through our work with Children in Wales. They have developed the Young Wales project, which works with existing youth groups, forums and councils to bring together their collective voice. This is invaluable to us when considering new legislation or developing new programmes and policies.

I am committed to ensuring that children and young people are able to voice their opinions on the decisions which affect them. To do so we must be innovative. That's why the first elections to the new Youth Parliament for Wales are so important. It will bring new opportunities for us to hear the voices of the young people of Wales and for them to help shape the future. Not just of Government but the Assembly as a whole.

An essential part of designing effective policy and services is understanding the impact proposals may have, both positive and negative. Traditionally we have identified the impacts of new policy on children through a standalone Children's Rights Impact Assessment.

The First Minister asked the Public Policy Institute for Wales to review processes for the significant number of impact assessments Government undertakes. As a result a new integrated process has been developed which provides a more rounded assessment of the impact of a proposed action or policy, including the social, economic, cultural and environmental effects.

I'm pleased that the key elements of the former Children's Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA) have been transferred to the new integrated impact assessment. The new process has not diluted the need for children and young people to be heard in developing government policy.

The Welsh Government is working hard to protect and promote the interests of Wales following the vote to leave the European Union. We are determined to ensure the best possible outcome for the people of Wales.

Many young people were frustrated at not having a say in the EU Referendum as the outcome will have a profound effect on their lives. So we have been engaging with them on Brexit through Young Wales. We are the only UK government to be doing so at this time and I look forward to hearing the outcome of the consultation at the end of this month.

It is vital we ensure they are given the opportunity to have a meaningful input into shaping our position on Brexit. It is only right that we listen and give them a role in influencing the future direction of Wales.

The Welsh Government has been clear that the UK withdrawal from the EU should in no way lead to a dilution in human rights protections, or, indeed any other social, environmental or employment protections. There is a firm commitment to

promoting equality and safeguarding human rights built into the DNA of the Welsh Government.

As a Government, we continue to have high regard for international human rights treaties and UN Conventions to which UK State party is signatory. We will seek to reflect both the spirit and the substance of each convention across our policies and programmes as appropriate.

Our Nation of Sanctuary plan outlines the breadth of work we are doing to ensure that the inequalities experienced by refugees and asylum seekers are reduced, their access to opportunities increased, and that relations between these communities and wider society are improved. Consultation on the new plan finished recently and we will be publishing a final version soon.

It is important to get current policy right, but we should also have an eye to the future too. Protecting that future was a fundamental principle of our ground breaking Well-being of Future Generations Act. This requires public bodies to consider people's wider well-being when providing services and to think

more about the long-term. It also requires them to work better with each other and with communities, to look at prevention and take a more joined-up approach.

The Welsh Government's ambition is for every child to get the best start in life. To achieve this we want to support a joined-up, responsive early years' system that puts the unique needs of each child at its heart. In *Prosperity for All* the Welsh Government made a specific commitment to do this.

Better outcomes for our children can only be achieved by us all working together to deliver services in a co-ordinated, integrated and timely way. Our programmes should come together seamlessly to get the best value for parents and children, from the limited resources available. So, we must work across Welsh Government and with health and local authorities to ensure services are sufficiently integrated and co-ordinated.

To take this forward we have developed an intensive co-construction project between Cwm Taf Public Service Board and Welsh Government to explore how early years services might be re-configured.

Our aim is to design services to support a preventative, long-term approach in keeping with the Well-being of Future Generations Act, which would offer a model to be utilised more widely across Wales.

A joined up approach is crucial to our work with children, young people and their families. We know children may encounter many adversities and barriers in their lives. Timely and appropriate intervention and support from others including parents, carers, communities or support services, can enable them to achieve their potential.

Children First areas embody this joined up approach. They bring together organisations to improve outcomes for children and young people in specific communities and reduce inequalities

they face compared with more socially advantaged children. I am pleased to report that I have made £100,000 available this year to support this important work.

We cannot possibly control or legislate against every adversity but where we can act to protect children it is imperative that we do so. I am not, and will not, be afraid to act where this is necessary.

A good example of this is our work to remove the defence of reasonable punishment.

In July this year, the First Minister reaffirmed the Welsh Government's commitment to removing the defence of reasonable punishment. With cross party support we are committed to introducing legislation by July 2019.

Removing the defence is about protecting children's rights by prohibiting the physical punishment of children by their parents or those acting in loco parentis. Article 19 requires governments to do all they can to ensure children are protected from all forms

of violence and bad treatment by their parents or anyone else who looks after them.

So our proposal to remove the defence is consistent with the Welsh Government's commitment to the principles of the UNCRC, and builds on changes that have already taken place in England and Wales to prohibit corporal punishment in schools, children's homes, local authority foster care and childcare provision.

While the primary responsibility for raising children lies with parents, the Welsh Government has a very specific role in creating a society in which children can grow up in a safe and nurturing environment.

I don't know a single parent who, when asked, doesn't want the very best for their children. For most families a new baby is an exciting time, bringing a huge amount of joy and happiness.

Watching your child grow-up and thrive, develop and discover the world around is one of the biggest privileges that any of us experience.

Removing the defence of reasonable punishment will not remove the right of the parent to discipline their children. Positive parenting and respecting children's rights is not about letting children do whatever they like. Children need boundaries and it is an essential part of good parenting.

That's why as a Government we have invested significantly in parenting support and in information and advice on positive parenting over a number of years, including health visitors: our family support programmes, Flying Start, Families First and our "Parenting Give it Time" campaign.

As well as protecting children, we must support them and their families to develop resilience so they can deal with life's challenges and adversities. There is a growing recognition of the long term impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) on children's life outcomes.

Understanding ACEs and their impact is important. That's why Welsh Government has supported the establishment of the ACE

Support Hub for Wales as a centre of knowledge, evidence and expertise. I believe we have made substantial inroads into becoming ACE aware in Wales. However, our focus needs to move towards prevention, breaking the cycle and supporting those whose lives have been negatively impacted by them.

So we have a range of programmes which support those who have experienced, are experiencing, or are in danger of experiencing ACEs. For example, the Flying Start and Families First programmes allow professionals to work with families and identify children at risk of ACEs.

These are tangible evidence of our commitment to the rights and wellbeing of children in our most disadvantaged communities.

We know that through our existing early years and children and family support programmes we are targeting support at some of the most disadvantaged communities and at those with the greatest need. I am immensely proud of the achievements and impact which programmes like Families First and Flying Start are making.

The approach taken by Families First is making a real difference to families and life chances are being improved as a result. The Team Around the Family in particular can have a transformative effect on family life. Support for families in times of crisis can be crucial in preventing things from escalating and potentially the need for children to be taken into care.

Experiencing the services offered through Flying Start has also been life-changing for many high need families. The evidence tells us Flying Start is making a decisive difference to the life chances of children in Wales. It had modest beginnings as a pilot in 2006, but now, each year, more than 36,000 children, under 4 years of age in Wales, are benefitting from the support it offers.

To date, the Welsh Government has invested almost £60m in deprived communities to develop the necessary infrastructure needed to deliver the Flying Start programme. Much of this expenditure has provided new childcare settings in communities where there was limited or no provision.

However, I recognise and share others concerns that there are children in Wales who would benefit from the more intensive support which the Flying Start approach offers.

We are currently reviewing Flying Start to ensure that as many families as possible can provide the secure and comforting environments which will enable their children to thrive. We want to learn from what works and see how that can be replicated.

We need to help build more resilient communities. But we will only be able to do this through local services committing to work together to support children and their families. I'm determined that through intervening early and by services working together, health, education, social care, we will ensure no child slips through the net.

We are committed to doing all we can to support families to stay together. However, some children need the protection that foster or residential care can offer. Improving support for children within their families is a priority. It's a major focus for my Ministerial Advisory Group on outcomes for children.

Collaboration is fundamental to the work of the group which is reflected by its broad, cross sector membership. It is taking forward a wide ranging programme of work across a number of work streams. One area is focussed on reducing the need for children to come into care. This has prevention and early intervention at its heart. It will include the national roll-out of the *Reflect* programme. This offers multi-agency support for families on the edge of care. It provides therapeutic support for emotional and behavioural problems in young people to reduce the impact of ACEs. It also takes account of the learning from the Care Crisis Review.

We are also working to improve our approach to the use of evidence in the Family Justice System. Earlier this summer the Nuffield Foundation gave the formal go-ahead to a Family Justice Observatory for Wales and England. Alongside other forms of professional knowledge and insight this will support the best decisions for children.

As part of this development there's an agreement for the administrative data held by CAF/CASS Cymru to be made available

to the Secure Anonymised Information Linkage databank or SAIL as it is known here at Swansea University.

For the first time this will allow CAF/CASS Cymru's data to be anonymously linked to other Welsh data sets at SAIL and open up the prospect of a powerful outcome focused enquiry as to the experiences of some of the most vulnerable children before, during and after family court proceedings.

Whilst it may take some time to fully realise the benefits of what this information is telling us, I am confident that in time it will help inform where changes and improvements can be made to really make a difference to the lives of children.

But let's be clear we need to intervene earlier to prevent family situations escalating to this point. We need to draw on the prevention and early intervention expertise that we have to reduce the numbers of children and families getting to crisis.

However, being in debt or unemployed can have a huge impact on families and their ability to cope with the stresses of everyday life.

There is no denying the devastating impact of austerity on the least affluent people in our society. The evidence is clear that the UK Government's tax and welfare reforms, especially for people who are working, has had a terrible effect on wealth levels in our poorest communities.

There is a consensus view amongst experts such as the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Resolution Foundation, that child poverty will increase significantly as a result of these reforms.

At a Wales level, the Equality and Human Rights Commission predict these reforms will result in nearly half of all households losing out. Families with children will be particularly hard hit and the report predicts that an additional 50,000 children will fall into poverty by 2021-22.

While Welsh Government does not hold the key levers which determine levels of poverty in Wales, there is much we can do with the levers we have available.

Delivering on the priorities set out in our National Strategy, Prosperity for All will ensure that action is taken across Welsh Government to tackle child poverty through our commitment to create the conditions and opportunities for people and communities to succeed, flourish and thrive.

Increasing well-being and economic prosperity are fundamental to improving outcomes for vulnerable children, including those living in poverty. The key commitments outlined in our National Strategy will help drive the tackling poverty agenda over this term of government, providing direction for our work which will support disadvantaged children to get the best possible start in life.

Our Children and Families (Wales) Measure places a duty on Welsh Ministers and named public bodies to set objectives for

tackling child poverty and I will be looking to deliver on these objectives.

We are committed to reducing the number of families living in workless households, as children living in these households are particularly at risk of living in poverty.

Preventing poverty is fundamental to our long-term vision for supporting low income households. We have given a commitment to increase the skills of parents and young people living in low-income households so they can secure well-paid employment and in work progression.

We are taking action to reduce the inequalities which exist in the health, education and economic outcomes of children and families by improving the outcomes of the poorest.

Our Child Poverty Strategy gives a commitment to support families living in poverty to increase household income through the provision of debt and financial advice.

While children will continue to face challenges, I am determined that this government will deliver on supporting them to have the best start in life.

While we have come a long way there is more to be done.

Our children are growing up in a world where there is such tremendous opportunity. A world in which there is a greater tolerance of difference and diversity.

Young people of today are more international in outlook.

Technology and social media has allowed them to develop an interest in music, politics and the environment that extends beyond the borders that constrained previous generations.

Children do care about the world and arguably they are more activist and articulate than ever. That's why we need to challenge the way we do things, to learn from what works, to challenge the status quo and to listen to our children.

We have a long and proud history of commitment to children's rights. And crucially, we have translated this into tangible support and improvements for our children, young people and their parents.

But we mustn't be complacent.

Our ambition must be to go further, working together to achieve the very best for children, families, their communities and our nation.

We face a number of significant challenges like Brexit and austerity. But at the same time there are many opportunities for our children and young people to thrive and succeed.

As we all look forward to celebrating the 30th Anniversary of the UNCRC next year, I am confident that our commitment to children's rights will support children and young people to achieve their true potential.

I want to work with you to promote and safeguard the rights of every child in Wales. To work together to ensure that each and every child is supported to have the best start in life.

This is my commitment... This is their right... They deserve nothing less.

Rydw i eisiau gweithio gyda chi i hyrwyddo a diogelu hawliau pob plentyn yng Nghymru. I weithio gyda'n gilydd i sicrhau bod pob plentyn yn cael ei gefnogi i gael y dechrau gorau mewn bywyd. Dyma yw fy ymrwymiad..... Dyma yw eu hawl..... Maent yn haeddu dim llai.

Diolch.

[c. **3,645 words**]