



Save the Children

Achub y Plant



Save the Children in Wales Manifesto calls for the 2021 Senedd Elections

Introduction

Save the Children wants all children to have a safe, happy childhood and ensure that they have the best start in life, enabling them to realise every opportunity for their future. One of the biggest challenges that any Welsh Government faces is reducing the educational attainment gap that children in poverty fall victim to. Young children are especially vulnerable to poverty and the effects it can have on their physical and emotional wellbeing.

There is long-standing, consistent evidence that shows a significant relationship between the disadvantage faced by children living in poverty and young children's early learning outcomes. By the age of three, children from disadvantaged backgrounds can be as much as a year behind their peers and this attainment gap widens by the time they enter school. Too many children in Wales, particularly those children living in poverty, are falling behind in their early years and, crucially, many never catch up later in life.

Access to a standard of living adequate to fulfil a child's physical, mental, social, and moral development is a right under article 27 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Article 4 states that all governments must spend to the "maximum extent of available resources" to free children from a life of poverty.

Rising levels of child poverty will require Governments at all levels to act. The UK Government can and should make full use of its powers, including the ability to increase family incomes.

The role of Welsh Government and Welsh local authorities in the next five years will be crucial to make sure we are going in the right direction in reducing child poverty.

The impact of Child Poverty

We call on the next Welsh Government to deliver strong and ambitious leadership for children by:

- Appointing a Minister for Children with oversight of, and accountability for all policy areas which have an impact on children.
- Establishing a Cabinet Sub-committee on Children to ensure coordination and better scrutiny of children's issues.
- Publishing a renewed Child Poverty Strategy with a Delivery Plan, with clear measurable milestones and ambitious targets, and with transparent reporting arrangements to reflect these impacts and so ensure that no child is disadvantaged because of family income.

Even before the Covid-19 crisis hit, nearly one in three (180,000) children in Wales were growing up in the grip of poverty. We believe this figure could rise significantly as a result of the pandemic, increasing the struggles that families face and driving many more into experiencing hardship. The impact is also likely to be higher due to the economic effects linked with existing disadvantages, leading to higher poverty rates in already poorer areas. We are particularly concerned about the impact of poverty on children's wellbeing and outcomes. Progress has been made, but the impact of Covid-19 on low income families has been stark and it will take significant action over the course of the next Senedd to achieve these vital goals.

We need to make progress on both preventing and reducing poverty amongst children, and its impact on young children's learning and development. Reducing poverty is key to tackling the attainment gap and improving children's outcomes in the early years, giving all children the best start in life. The impact of child poverty is felt in both a child's educational and home environment, with the long-term effects on young children a particular concern.

We know that many low-income families with children often experience high living costs. Even paying for basics such as food, household bills or nappies for their children can be a daily struggle. Families shouldn't be faced with impossible choices over whether to put food on the table or money on the electricity meter. Access to Free School Meals is a vital lifeline for many families, enabling children to have a hot meal every day.

We call on the next Welsh Government to:

- Extend the eligibility for free school meals to all children, including over the school holidays, where a parent or guardian is in receipt of Universal Credit or equivalent benefits.

The significance of poverty in the early years and closing the poverty related early learning gap

Too many children in Wales, particularly those children living in poverty, are falling behind in their early years and, crucially, many never catch up. The early years of a child's life will shape their personality, skills and ability.

All young children in Wales should have access to and benefit from high quality education and care. Achieving this ambition rests on having an early year's policy that ensures access to a system that will provide high quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) to all young children whilst continuing to support families.

We know that poverty impacts on children's outcomes and parents' ability to support their child's learning. Parents are the most important influence in a child's life and a child's first educator. We know that children who have a rich and varied home learning environment, do better than their peers, regardless of family income levels or parental educational attainment. Therefore, it is crucial to enhance early learning and play opportunities for children by supporting parents to provide a stimulating and responsive home learning environment from birth and empower and enable parents to remain engaged in their child's learning as they start school.

Providing opportunities for engaging with and listening to parents, early in the process of policy planning, should be integral to the development of an effective engagement strategy.

We call on the next Welsh Government to:

- Ensure that all children living in poverty, regardless of age and parental work status, have access to a high quality coherent and integrated ECEC system.
- Work with schools and other early years' service providers, including the allocation of funding, to promote the importance of family support and parental engagement; as well as making sure this is promoted as part of the roll-out of the new curriculum.
- Support parents to engage in their children's learning and development at home. Parents need to be able to access support, information, and resources, including digital resources, to effectively support their children's learning at home without stigma.

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