



Early Years Action Group

Position paper: Cost of Living Crisis

- **The early years matter**
- **Poverty has a doubly negative effect on babies and young children: limited access to opportunity and impact of parental stress**
 - **Now more than ever babies, young children, their families and the professionals who support them need help and support**

Context:

The current cost of living crisis comes at a time when we are still recovering from the financial pressures and trauma caused by the pandemic.

Research from [2022] shows that more than one in three children in Wales are living in poverty and more than a quarter of children in all 22 Welsh local authorities are now living below the poverty line.¹ In some areas rates of child poverty are nearly at 40%.

Children growing up in poverty face the negative effects from two directions: access to opportunity is reduced through limited resources, and parental and family stress are increased as a result of the challenges of living with a constrained income.

Babies and very young children are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of poverty. Children's experiences in their first days, weeks and years significantly influences the rest of their lives. All babies have a right to have the best start in life, but unresolved trauma or persistent difficulties in early relationships can have profound effects on the course of a baby's health and development over a lifetime.

Healthy development depends on the quality and reliability of a young child's relationship with their parents or caregivers. Parenting can be challenging at the best of times, but dealing with day-to-day impacts of poverty can negatively affect the mental health and wellbeing of parents and carers. This in turn can impact on the quality of their relationships and attachment to their children - with potential life-long implications for the child if this is not resolved.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) explicitly recognises the central role played by parents and families in ensuring that children grow up healthy, happy and safe. Article 3 clearly states that Government must support families in their vital role in raising children. With the triple threat of the ongoing impacts of the pandemic and the cost of living and climate crises, families face overwhelming pressures and children's rights are at serious risk. The long-term impacts are set to be catastrophic for children and costly for society, and it is vital that there is access to early support for any expectant or new parent finding the challenges overwhelming, including those experiencing mental health difficulties.

Despite the gravity of these global challenges, with the right support at the right time, families can live happy and healthy lives.

¹ research by Loughborough University, on behalf of the End Child Poverty Coalition



Recent Evidence:

Recent polling of parents in Wales demonstrates the challenges that families face:

- Two thirds of parents worry about paying for both food and fuel
- 1 in 2 worried about the pandemic's impact on children's mental health
- Parents are concerned about the cost of living over the next 12 months, and about paying for children's social activities as well as food and fuel.²

Childline saw a 37% increase (across the UK) in poverty/financial issues being mentioned by children. Poverty can often be an implied driver behind other issues, such as abuse and neglect.³

A recent report by Save the Children identified the costs of having a new baby as one of the top reasons families received an Early Years Grant. It also noted that 63% of children reached were under 6 years old. This fits with a wider trend in Wales, whereby households containing young children (0- 4 years old are more likely to be living in relative poverty).⁴

In Children in Wales's recent Poverty survey, 93% of practitioners identified the rising cost of living as the highest related poverty issue for families. Practitioners stated that they are seeing a dramatic increase in the number of families that cannot meet their basic needs, such as the provision of food, electricity and clothing. As one practitioner put it, "There is not one family that I am working with who have not said that they are now struggling".⁵

Quality early childhood education and care enables families to access the labour market and can make a real difference to children's early development - especially those from less affluent families. The current pressures on childcare services risk negatively affecting families' economic outcomes and children's early developmental outcomes⁶.

The current gaps in availability and extreme pressure of some services, alongside budget pressures, represent a direct threat to some early intervention services. These services are key to preventing escalation into other more intensive services that are already under pressure themselves.

² More than four out of five parents (85%) said they were concerned about paying for gas and electricity. Almost three quarters said they were concerned about paying for petrol (74%) and paying for food (72%). Almost two thirds said they were concerned about paying for children's social activities and school trips (63%). (*Nesta parent polling, 18-22 August 2022, conducted by Opinium; unpublished, please contact helen.wales@nesta.org.uk for further information*)

³ Hogg, S. & Mayes, G. (2022). Casting Long Shadows: The ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on babies, their families and the services that support them. First 1001 Days Movement and Institute of Health Visiting

⁴ - Covid to the Cost Of Living in Wales

https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/content/dam/gb/reports/covid_to_cost_of_living_in_wales_eng.pdf

⁵ Children in Wales (2022) Report on the 6th Annual Child and Family Poverty Surveys

CIW_Poverty_report_2022_English.pdf (t

⁶ Early Years survey, arad research, 2022



Existing Policy Commitments

Every child has the right to the best start in life; including a standard of living that is good enough to meet their physical and mental needs. The Children and Young People's Plan makes a clear commitment for this and good early years services and support for parents or carers.

The current work to strengthen families and communities through early intervention and prevention programmes such as Flying Start and Families First is vital. The commitments to universal free childcare for two-year-olds and to establishing an integrated Early Childhood Care and Education system needs to move quickly and respond to meet changing needs.

What needs to be done?

We are at risk of focusing on short-term and crisis responses. We call on Welsh Government to meet these challenges whilst continuing to think and plan for the longer term. We have many important policy commitments in place. Now is the time to deliver.

We call on Welsh Government to:

- Ensure parents to be/ parents of young children have access to the right support at the right time to enable them to give their children the best start in life, including childcare; perinatal mental health specialist support; support for Dads and parenting support.
- Prioritise babies and young children in tough decisions ahead, including protecting services that support children and families.
- Review and revise the Child Poverty Strategy, and publish a Delivery Plan with involvement and input from those in the Early Years (including Early Years Action Group).
- Bring forward plans to develop ECEC in a way that promotes genuine equity of experience, access (including Welsh Medium provision) and sustainability.
- Prioritise funding and policy based on the principle that promoting equity and overcoming the barriers of poverty for children in their very early years is more cost effective than later intervention.
- Commit to robust monitoring of the impact of poverty on children's outcomes in order to be able to ensure that interventions are having the desired results; this is especially important with the end of phase assessment in the new curriculum.
- Proactively listen to babies, young children, and their families to find out their experiences and views.⁷
- Invest in parent-infant relationship services ensuring there is specialist support available in every area in Wales, to help identify and address the mental health needs of the most vulnerable babies and young children.
- Ensure that families with babies and very young children are prioritised as part of any Government Welfare Take Up campaign to ensure they are able to claim financial support available to them from the UK and Welsh Governments including Health Start Vouchers

This paper has been produced by the Early Years Action Group which includes representatives from BookTrust Cymru, Children in Wales, Early Years Wales, Home Start Cymru, Mudiad Meithrin, Save the Children, NSPCC Cymru, Play Wales, Nesta and PACEY Cymru. It was formed in 2020 to bring together third sector organisations who have a focus on Early Years, and to establish a collective voice to motivate and activate positive change for the youngest children.

⁷ for more information on how this can be done go to www.childreninwales.org.uk/earlyyearsresources

