



Consultation response on the priorities for the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee

ABOUT OUR CHARITY

FNF Both Parents Matter Cymru is a children's rights charity supporting parents and grandparents who are facing exclusion from the lives of the children they care about. Our work is underpinned by the UNCRC – specifically Articles 9.3 and 18.1

We have also been recognised by Welsh Government Fairer Futures division and by the WCVA Gender Network as a representative body for men as a group with protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010.

Our charity supports runs a telephone Helpline for parents and grandparents with child contact problems – receiving around 1000 calls per annum. Our primary support method is however our monthly face to face support meetings that take place in 11 different locations across Wales from Bangor to Newport and Carmarthen to Queensferry attended by around 1100 people attend each year.

All of our meetings are registered with the Law Society's charity Law Works Cymru as Legal Advice Clinics where attendees can meet with a family law solicitor on a one to one basis to receive free specialist legal advice.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRIORITIES

In work Poverty

Lone Parents face significant challenges in ensuring that they receive the help and support they need to be able to provide for their children. Lone parents with dependent children represented 25% of all families with dependent children in 2015. Women accounted for 90% of lone parents with dependent children and men the remaining 10%. (ONS, 2015)

Research from the Modern Fatherhood initiative by the University of East Anglia has shown that non-resident fathers who see their children several times a week are almost 3 times more likely to contribute financially to their upbringing. (Eloise Poole, 2013)

We know that services funded by Welsh Government are not required to record the gender of parents accessing support. This was confirmed to us by officials within Welsh Government and confirmed by letter from the First Minister in September 2015. We therefore cannot know with certainty that these services are reaching all parents – particularly fathers – whether they live with their children or not.

In 2014 we undertook research with the help and support of Welsh Government and Children in Wales to discover the extent to which men were being engaged by parenting support services. Our research engaged with 32 different services across the whole of Wales who had reached 169,000 service users in the financial year ended 31st March 2013. These services reported that the average level of engagement with fathers was between 3 and 11% of all adults. In Early Years settings the figure was at or below 3%. (FNF Both Parents Matter Cymru, 2014)

We have raised the issue of the lack of engagement with fathers with the Wales Audit Office as we believe that the failure to reach them represents poor value for money by public services.

Poverty and welfare reform

Approximately 70% of our service users are fathers, most of which are non-resident parents. Many of them have left or been forced to leave the former matrimonial home following divorce or separation. In recent months we have started to capture data about their financial circumstances – specifically in relation to accessing Legal Aid for family disputes under LASPO regulations. This data is suggesting that around 45% of our service users would qualify for Legal Aid on financial grounds because they are on benefits or low incomes.

One of the greatest barriers they face to maintaining shared care of their children is the problem of accommodation. Men are more than four times less likely not to be considered priority need for housing (Male – 1143, Female – 264) because they are not seen to be the primary carers for their children and are deemed to be Single Person Households (StatsWales, 2015-16) These men are often accommodated in hostels such as those run by the YMCA where rules permit a maximum of two visitors in their rooms and virtually no place for children to stay overnight.

Where men on low incomes or benefits are able to re-build their lives and obtain housing they are then subject to the Bedroom charge which is a further barrier to their ability to have their children with them overnight and for them to play a role in a shared care arrangement. In addition to the impact on these men there is an impact on their former partners because more of the burden of care falls upon the shoulders of these women which moves the further from the labour market and contributes to the persistence of the ‘motherhood penalty’ in the Gender Pay gap.

To illustrate the difficulties faced by our service users one recent case that the charity has dealt with involved a father who was evicted from the family home with an Occupation Order. He worked as a cleaner from 5.30am until 8am five or six days a week to enable him to take his children to school and to be available to care for the youngest son who was pre-school age during the daytime. This father had been the main parent in the life of his middle child (aged 5) following a near fatal car accident which forced him to be in hospital

for 10 months. His father was at his bed side during the day and evening while mother cared for the other two children at home. Following the child's discharge from hospital the father provided therapeutic care to aid his son's rehabilitation at home. Sadly the mother had decided that she no longer loved the father and wanted him to leave the house. Eventually she moved out taking the children with her and stating that the father 'would never see the children again'. The court case turned upon the mother being the de facto primary carer for the children and so the court ordered the father's removal from the property making him homeless and placing him in the YMCA hostel. He was then assessed as being unintentionally homeless BUT not as priority need because he no longer cared for his children since mother denied him contact. The father sought to rent a property where he could reasonably have the children overnight but would have been subject to the Bedroom charge. The father is still unable to have his children overnight more than 9 months after being evicted from his home.

The effectiveness of Communities First

Communities First plays a significant part in the Welsh Government's overall strategy to help disadvantaged communities to improve outcomes around health, prosperity and learning.

There are some excellent initiatives that we are aware of around the engagement with fathers and non-resident parents in general – for example in Merthyr Tydfil. However we understand that in terms of parenting support (as identified above under 'In work Poverty') the Welsh Government does not require services it funds to record the gender of the parents accessing support. The First Minister wrote to us on 3rd August 2015 responding to our request that services should record the gender of the parents accessing them as we believe that fathers are significantly under-represented amongst parents engaged. The First Minister did not directly respond to the request for gender to be recorded but rather stated that

'To record accurately the number of mothers and fathers attending different courses Local Authorities would have to manually scrutinise attendance lists to record relationship details. This would place a disproportionate administrative burden on them.'

We believe that this statement may constitute a breach of the duty of due regard in relation to the Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011 – specifically Article 18.1 which requires the Welsh Government to use its best efforts to ensure recognition of the principle that both parents share common responsibility for the upbringing of children.

We would invite the Committee to scrutinise the Communities First programme and its outcome monitoring to determine whether the gender of parents accessing support is recorded under Outcome Measures LC 1.3, 1.1, 3.4, 3.1, HC 3.2, 6.5) and if so to consider how effective the programme is in targeting support for non-resident parents and fathers in general.

Eloise Poole, S. S. (2013). *What do we know about Non-Resident Fathers*. Retrieved September 2, 2016, from Modern Fatherhood: <http://www.modernfatherhood.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Briefing-paper-Non-resident-fathers.pdf>

FNF Both Parents Matter Cymru. (2014). *Mapping Male Participation in Family Support*. Retrieved September 2, 2016, from FNF Both Parents Matter cymru: https://www.fnf-bpm.org.uk/image/upload/branch/cymru/Male_participation_in_Family_Support_services_March_2014.pdf

ONS. (2015). *Families & Households 2015*. Retrieved September 2, 2016, from ONS : <http://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/bulletins/familiesandhouseholds/2015-11-05#lone-parents>

StatsWales. (2015-16). *Households found to be eligible, homeless but not in a priority need or homeless, in a priority need but intentionally so during the year. Main reason for loss of last settled home by type of household*. Retrieved September 2, 2016, from StatsWales - Housing - Homeslessness: <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Housing/Homelessness/households-found-to-be-eligible-homeless-but-not-in-a-priority-need-or-homeless-in-a-priority-need-but-intentionally-so-during-the-year-main-reason-for-loss-of-last-settled-home-by-type-of-househ>

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