



yr undeb dros addysg

Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL Cymru's) Response to the *Taking Action of Child Poverty: Consultation Paper*

The Association of Teachers and Lecturers represents over 160,000 education professionals across the four constituent parts of the United Kingdom. It draws its membership from teachers and lecturers, leaders and support staff in maintained and independent schools, and Further Education Colleges. As well as campaigning vigorously to protect and enhance members' pay and conditions ATL also believes that the education profession has a key role in developing education strategy and policy. ATL has taken a leading role in publicizing the impact that poverty has on children's wellbeing. ATL Cymru represents over 6,500 education professionals in colleges and schools across the whole of Wales.

ATL Cymru welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation and we are supportive of the partnership approach and joint agreement outlined in the document. ATL Cymru believes that placing a duty on public agencies to demonstrate their commitment to assist in the eradication of child poverty will help progress in this area to ensue. Child poverty is a crosscutting issue and as such needs a multi-agency commitment and approach.

ATL Cymru would welcome the opportunity to sign the agreement to demonstrate our commitment to working with WAG to tackle the issue of child poverty in Wales and would suggest that other teaching unions and the TUC should be added to the list of organisations to sign the joint agreement. ATL Cymru applauds the WAG's commitment to halving child poverty by 2010 and to eradicate child poverty completely by 2020 but we must express serious concerns over the ability to deliver this target as 2008 has seen the rate of child poverty in Wales increase (to 150,000 from 144,000 in 2007)¹ meaning 25% of children in Wales are affected. Whilst much has been done by the Welsh Assembly Government to introduce policies to counteract disadvantage, there is little hard evidence about the impact that these policies have had individually or collectively. ATL Cymru agrees with the WAG that research and evaluation into how children and young people can be lifted out of poverty needs to be undertaken to enable an evidence based policy response to be developed which can be targeted effectively.² ATL Cymru is renewing its call for crosscutting research to evaluate the impact of policies to ensure that their focus is correct.³

Concerns about Current Policy Impact

ATL Cymru agrees with the broad framework proposed but is fearful that the current emphasis on 'social exclusion' that drives many of the Westminster government's policies on poverty is inadequate. We believe that there needs to be a better understanding between socio-economic status and educational outcomes. ATL Cymru believes a systematic focus on social class would lead to more comprehensive and effective policies addressing the causes of poverty and deprivation. We believe that specific groups of people are systematically disadvantaged due to structural discrimination on the basis of, or a combination of race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, age, family status and religion/belief. Social exclusion by contrast focuses on discrete individuals in poverty. We *fundamentally* disagree with this focus which can seem to suggest that poverty is the responsibility of the individual concerned who must attempt to lift themselves out of it.⁴

ATL Cymru believes that the WAG needs to adopt an explicit and comprehensive understanding of social class if it is serious about tackling low educational attainment, disadvantage and social exclusion. The quality of school activity only accounts for a 14% variation in pupil's performance and the brightest children in Britain's poorest homes are outperformed by the least gifted children from wealthy homes by the age of seven. The low attainment of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds is driven more by a combination of factors related to poverty and deprivation than ability.⁵ A fresh debate on education and social class would reveal whether all schools and colleges are offering a broad and balanced enough education to their pupils.

ATL Cymru agrees with the new legislation to reduce inequality of outcomes. Local Authorities need to ensure that the actions they undertake to reduce inequality of outcome are effectively targeted to ensure they have maximum impact. Detailed research and evaluation of Local Authority areas needs to take place to enable this to be achieved.

ATL Cymru also agrees with the new legislation in respect of play provision. Play is a vital component in the education of children and is a key part in the development of essential skills such as communication, numeracy, etc. We agree that there should be auditing of play provision and local strategies put in place. We also agree that LA's should have to take reasonable steps within their available resources to remedy local deficits in their play provision that are highlighted by audits.

The Vital Role of Education

Education plays a key role in tackling poverty, particularly in educating people about the causes of poverty and its effects on social cohesion. The role of education is crucial in promoting and advancing the poverty agenda. However we have concerns whether constant economic growth and ever-increasing

consumption patterns, which are part of the premise that ‘better job opportunities are the main route out of poverty’ (cf. Strategy of the Welsh Assembly Government for Tackling Child Poverty, 2005), are ultimately sustainable.⁶ We think that new and innovative strategies to tackle child poverty need to be developed; including strategies that acknowledge the inter-linked nature of women’s poverty and child poverty are ultimately substantial. To simply expect education in its current format to provide a route out of child poverty narrows the scope of the issue in an unacceptable way.

ATL Cymru agrees that new legislation should be made to require the provision of free childcare places for two year olds. There is a need to increase the number of high quality, affordable childcare places in Wales. The lack of childcare places exacerbates the difficulties faced by women wishing to return to the workforce. Increasing the number of quality childcare places would enable women to have more flexibility and freedom to return to the workforce which would help tackle the issue of women’s poverty, which, as stated earlier, is inter-linked with child poverty.

ATL Cymru is encouraged by the WAG’s commitment to **“encourage and publicise initiatives to reduce the cost of education”**.⁷ Many of ATL Cymru’s member’s schools have policies and initiatives to reduce the cost of education, thus having a positive impact on child poverty. Policies include:

- Many schools supply polo and sweat shirts at cost and discretely offer some families free uniform. Some schools only require children to wear black trousers and plain black footwear in an attempt to keep the uniform affordable.
- Needy children are invited to take part in breakfast club in school to ensure they eat before lessons
- One school supplies exam kits for pupils (paper, pens, pencils, etc)
- Family learning is supported through a group for parental literacy. ATL Cymru’s members are concerned that the curtailing of the RAISE funding will affect programmes such as this and above all pupils and students.
- Homework clubs support pupils who do not have a quiet space, a flat surface to work on, access to reference materials or a supportive adult
- One member’s school has an emergency clothes and shoes bank. Most items are donated by staff members

Rural Poverty

ATL Cymru is encouraged by the consultations commitment to **“ensure the challenges and needs of children and young people in rural areas are considered and addressed”**.⁸ Children and young people exposed to poverty and deprivation in their lives often become disengaged from the system which has a negative impact on their future aspirations as they often feel trapped in their current predicament and feel doomed to stay there. When addressing the issue of poverty there is a strong bias for concentrating on urban poverty, as

urban poverty is highly visible and well documented. Social exclusion in rural areas is rarely captured in official statistical data because of the dispersal of poor rural households and their often close proximity to affluence.⁹ Concerns have recently been expressed by the WAG Rural Development Sub-committee that policies and programmes of the Welsh Assembly Government do not reach people in rural areas.¹⁰ All actions and policies related to child poverty need a rigorous rural impact assessment to ensure that children and young people in these areas are not ignored or forgotten.

Contact:

Dr Philip Dixon
Director, ATL Cymru
Tel: 02920 465 000
Email: cymru@atl.org.uk

¹ Department of Work and Pensions, Households below the average income figures, 2008
<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/mediacentre/pressreleases/2008/jun/drc083-100608.asp>

² WAG, *Taking Action on Child Poverty: Consultation Paper*, June 2008,
<http://new.wales.gov.uk/consultation/dsjlg/2008/takingaction/consultatione.pdf?lang=en>

³ David Egan paper for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, *Combating child poverty in Wales: are effective education strategies in place?*, December 2007

⁴ ATL Position Statement, *Poverty and social exclusion in rural areas*, 2008

⁵ ATL Position Statement, *Poverty and social exclusion in rural areas*, 2008

⁶ Briefing on ATL's position on child poverty and education

⁷ WAG, *Taking Action on Child Poverty: Consultation Paper*, 2008

⁸ WAG, *Taking Action on Child Poverty: Consultation Paper*, June 2008

⁹ ATL Position Statement, *Poverty and Social Exclusion in Rural Areas*, 2008

¹⁰ http://www.assemblywales.org/bus-home/bus-committees/bus-committees-third1/bus-committees-third-rd-home/bus-committees-third-rd-agendas/rdc_3_-14-08_p3_rdc_report_on_poverty_and_deprivation_in_rural_wales.pdf?langoption=3&ttl=RDC%2