

Voices from Care Cymru.

Additional written evidence to the Senedd Petitions Committee – routine collection and publication of how many babies / children return to their care experienced parents’ care at the end of a Parent and Child Placement. (Petition P-06-1161)

Introduction.

Voices From Care Cymru (VfCC) is grateful to the Petitions Committee for the opportunity to provide evidence in person, and particularly grateful for the engagement of Committee Members and staff with care experienced young parents.

The oral evidence already presented and this additional written evidence is based on the academic research of Louise Roberts, which was commissioned by VfCC, and with which the Committee is already familiar, on the experiences of care experienced parents and on the observations of VfCC staff working with and supporting care experienced parents.

We wish to stress, as we did in our oral evidence, that, while there is some good practice in supporting care experienced parents and there are some positive outcomes for care experienced parents and their children, there continues to be widespread systematic failure, and that this failure is rooted in large measure in the stigma attached to young people who have been through the care system and the prejudice and discrimination to which they are subjected. Too many children are still removed from the care of their care experienced parents. Care experienced parents often do not receive the support from their corporate parents that any good parent should provide to a young person who is expecting then caring for a baby. And the lack of support for care experienced young people – many still children in the care of their corporate parents – whose children are taken into care is often shocking.

We are grateful to the Committee for broadening scope of this Inquiry beyond the need for better information – which in itself is crucial – to look more broadly at issues effecting care experienced parents. Below we expand on some of the issues we touched on in giving oral evidence and those raised by the care experienced parents themselves and make some

suggestions that the Committee may wish to consider when making recommendations in its Report.

Detailed Recommendations.

Inappropriate sharing of information.

Care experienced parents tell us of misinformation being shared about them and information being shared inappropriately and without their consent between professionals acting in a corporate parenting capacity. This leads to further emotional distress in meetings and leads to distrust of the professionals who should be providing support to parents.

We recommend – That Welsh Government should issue guidance to ensure that all information shared between corporate parenting parties, including social services, health, the criminal justice system, and housing should be shared with parents before it is shared with other professionals. This should further ensure that any discussions that lead to concerns where actions are necessary these actions and the reasons for them should be provided in writing, in comprehensible language to the parents and signed by all parties to ensure that there is a mutual understanding of the concerns and the proposed actions.

Independence and Impartiality.

Care experienced parents tell us that they often experience conflicts of interest and potential bias when Cafacss workers, midwives and social workers overseeing their cases knew of the care experienced parent as a child. For example, one young parent was told ‘We need to keep an eye on you to make sure you don’t turn out like your mother’. This is stigmatising and distressing. Parents also tell us of situations where professionals who are supposed to be providing independent assessments, like Independent Social Workers and Independent Reviewing Officers are individuals who have previously been in the employ of the Local Authority and are not truly independent.

We recommend – That Welsh Government issue guidance to ensure that, as far as possible, those professionals addressing any concerns about a care experienced parent’s child should not be professionals who have inappropriate knowledge of the care experienced parent’s own experience of care. Where it is not possible to ensure this, professionals should be rigorously supervised to ensure that their prior knowledge of the care

experienced parent's history does not in itself influence their judgement of that care experienced parent's parenting. Guidance should also ensure that all parenting assessments are undertaken by truly independent parties with no previous affiliation to the Local Authority.

Information and support with regard to emergency removals and child protection medical review processes.

We have seen numerous examples where care experienced parents involved in these processes are given little coherent information and no support or advice. They have not had clear explanations of concerns or explanations of decisions. This makes it impossible for the parent to participate properly in the process, making it much harder for them to maintain contact and reducing the likelihood of their child being returned to their care and enabled to thrive.

We recommend – That Welsh Government issue Guidance to ensure that care experienced parents who experience any kind of removal of their child be provided with clear information about processes and timescales in language that they can understand and that professionals involved in the processes have a duty to ensure that the parent understands the processes and timescales.

We recommend – That the new advocacy service for parents whose children are at the edge of care that Welsh Government has announced it will provide be truly independent of all Local Authorities so that care experienced parents will trust the advocate to be truly 'on their side'. We further recommend that this new service take a Children's Rights based approach from the outset, acknowledging and understanding that in the case of care experienced parents they may well be the corporate children of the Local Authority themselves, and that their rights must be realised as well as those of their child.

Conflicts and confusion when the care experienced parent is still themselves in the care of the Local Authority.

Care experienced parents tell us that they often struggle to access support, including financial support, with different departments – for example leaving care teams who have a duty to the care experienced parent and children's services teams who have a responsibility towards the child shifting responsibility from one to the other, leaving both parent and child unsupported. Care experienced parents are often afraid to disclose their

pregnancies, for fear of stigma and blame, making it hard for them to access timely advice and support.

We recommend – that Welsh Government issues Guidance to ensure more consistency of service to young people leaving care and setting out clearly the how responsibilities should be shared between different teams in situations such as the one described above. The Guidance should also place a clear duty on Local Authorities to ensure that young people leaving care have access to flexible information and support to help them develop healthy relationships and set boundaries.

Isolation and access to informal support,

Care experienced parents tell us that they often feel very isolated and lonely. Restrictions are placed on those who have access to their child, which of course may be necessary to ensure the safety of a child on the at-risk register. But it sometimes takes months for social service to undertake the necessary checks to allow the young parent to be supported by members of the extended family or friends, meaning that the young parent cannot get the support that all parents of new babies need it when they need it most. They also tell us that they are criticised for doing small things for themselves – like having a hair cut – and that they cannot afford to pay for professional childcare support.

We recommend – That Welsh Government set mandatory time frames for the assessment of the safety and suitability of extended family and friends wishing to offer support to care experienced parents, and monitor to ensure these time frames are adhered to.

We recommend – That Welsh Government give consideration as to how financial resources might be provided to care experienced parents to enable them to access professional care for their child in addition to the national childcare offer, both to enable the care experienced parent to access education or employment and to support them in their parenting role.

Inequality and stigma in health care.

Care experienced parents tell us that they often experience stigma in the health care system. They report being asked by midwives when they attend early appointments if they have ever had any involvement with social services. This is clearly inappropriate as their involvement may have been years in the past and have no bearing on their ability to parent now. Instead,

it is appropriate to ask, of course about current social services involvement. They also report often having to stay in hospital long after their babies are born because of a lack of suitable housing (see below) and being visited by numerous professionals, with their care experienced status being discussed by professionals in front of other new parents, increasing isolation and stigma.

We recommend – That Welsh Governments require all Local health Boards to review their practice with regard to care experienced parents, and to issues new guidance and provide training to staff as necessary. Welsh Government must ensure that that leaders in the Health Service are aware of their responsibilities as corporate parents and act on them.

Housing

Care experienced young people in general, and care experienced parents in particular, tell us that they are often not supported to find appropriate accommodation, that there is insufficient planning around transition to ensure appropriate housing is available when they need it, and insufficient support to enable them to retain tenancies once they are housed. Care experienced parents report being negatively judged in parenting assessments because they lack equipment that they have asked repeatedly for the resources to buy, and care experienced parents who have had their child removed report being evicted at very short notice from their accommodation once their child is removed, resulting in street homelessness at a time of extreme distress.

We recommend – That Welsh Government issue Guidance to ensure appropriate time frames around planning for care experienced young people, and care experienced parents in particular, have their housing needs met and that they are supported to maintain their tenancies. This Guidance should ensure that support is flexible, and that care experienced young people whose children are removed are supported to move on to appropriate accommodation in a manner that understands the grief and trauma that they are experiencing.

Court Processes.

Care experienced young people tell us that they find these very intimidating and difficult to navigate. They often experience difficulty in getting the right legal advice, either because they don't know how to find it, or they can't find

a solicitor they feel they can trust, as the solicitor may have acted in previous cases for the Local Authority, or for financial reasons if Legal Aid runs out. They also tell us that Courts often give more weight to the evidence of Social Services than they do to that of other professionals – for example health visitors who may be more positive about the care experienced parent's parenting, and better informed.

We recommend – That Welsh Government ensures the new advocacy service for parents whose children are on the edge of care enables and supports care experienced parents to work more effectively with the Court systems to enable their voices to be heard.

We recommend – That Welsh Government work with the non – devolved aspects of the justice system to improve the experience of care experienced parents going through the system.

Headline Recommendations.

We appreciate that the above recommendations may go into more detail than the Committee may wish to recommend to Welsh Government, but we felt it was important to share this level of detail with the Committee, if only for context. We would wish to stress once again that these reflect the contemporary experience of care experienced parents.

We have five higher level recommendations, which, if implemented, would address the issues set out in detail above, which we commend to the Committee for consideration.

- 1) The Committee may wish to recommend to Welsh Government that they mandate the adoption of the Good Parenting Charter by all corporate parents, setting out a timeframe for implementation and a robust and transparent accountability framework.
- 2) The Committee may wish to recommend that the current Welsh Government work programme on corporate parenting be strengthened and expedited, ensuring it addresses all the relevant issues the Committee Inquiry has identified, and that consideration be given to legislating to ensure that progress is timely and uniform across Wales.
- 3) The Committee may wish to recommend to Welsh Government that it leads a cultural shift in the provision of services to care experienced parents and their children, ensuring that all legislation, policy and delivery has the promotion of equality and children's rights embedded, in line with UNCRC, as enshrined in Welsh Law.

Conclusion

Voices From Care Cymru wishes to express our gratitude once again to the Committee both for undertaking this Inquiry and for the positive and inclusive manner in which it has been conducted. The care experienced parents we support felt heard and respected, and this is of great value in itself. We would also like to thank the Committee staff for their help and support.

We hope that this written evidence will be of use and would of course be happy to provide any additional information the Committee may require.

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