

Petition P-06-1161 Routine collection and publication of data of how many babies/children return to their care experienced parents care at the end of a Parent and Child Placement

The purpose of receiving evidence in relation to the above petition is to understand:

- Young people's experiences of having a child whilst in care themselves or as a care leaver
- Whether young care experienced parents feel supported and are provided good quality practical, emotional support and guidance

The Committee would also like to hear from NYAS about your experiences from the perspectives of advocacy provision and children's rights. This would probably be as part of a panel in a committee meeting.

To address the above question NYAS has compiled the following report, the content has been supported by Project Unity who are and have been working with Care experienced pregnant and new mothers throughout Wales. To ensure clarity the report will address the issues through question and answer.

1. To what extent are care experienced parents at more risk of having of compulsory interventions from children's services and removal of a child, either temporary or permanently? Is there evidence they are treated differently by service providers and professionals?

Project Unity can confirm that every young women we have worked with to date has had intervention from Social services, this would appear to happen as a matter of course, when a midwife is aware that the young mother is care experienced she will automatically be on an initial referral to social services for assessment, this could well be a belief that she may need extra support due to lack of family support but it does begin the child protection process. If the young women has a Personal Advisor through the post 16 team or indeed a social worker, then again, the process of assessment is automatic.

Throughout pregnancy the young women and her baby become the subject of meetings where decisions are made regarding their future, the young women state that their previous history in care is held against them in a judgement as to whether they can be a parent.

The following examples are quoted from meetings where decisions were made as to whether the unborn baby would be placed on the Child Protection register: -

Example - A young women in her 20's living independently only 5 months pregnant attended a conference as requested. During the conference she was confronted with issues that were in relation to her childhood when she had called ChildLine over 100 times, this was perceived as a negative and a statement made that "the unborn baby would be placed on the register as it was unclear whether she would cope with the demands of parenting". These calls took place when she was 14 years old and had just been removed from her family home and into foster care, there was no discussion as to why these had been made and whether it was just a matter of reaching out for support.

Project Unity advocate was present at this meeting and asked the young women if she would like to challenge it which she did, the response “we would prefer to see how things go with your history”. Because we continued to work with her the advocate complimented her for using her initiative and reaching out for support at a time when things were so traumatic.

Example – A young women and her partner attended Child protection conference the young women was 18 and her partner 22 with a full-time job, currently living with her mum who had she returned to at the age of 16, promised support from the young mans extended family. Both were distressed when at the conference the unborn baby was placed on the register due to the following comment

“We need to keep a close eye on the situation as when you were 14 you ran away from your foster care placement on numerous occasions, and we are concerned that you may abandon the baby?”

The young women have stated “always a child from care “. They see themselves as an open book that belongs to social services several of them state that “our bodies have become the responsibility of social services”.

Then we have the young mothers, aged 14-15 years old, who are still in care themselves. Project Unity works with several young women of this age group. The young women feel that once they are pregnant, they are forgotten, their personal support dwindles, decisions are made as to where they will live and whether they will live with their babies.

The question for all these young women is how they move on, what needs to change they did not come into care because of their own actions but that of a perpetrator the ACEs are stacked against them.

What needs to change – Investing time in the child, young person when they arrive in care we place them away from the perceived danger and then fail them by not supporting them in their personal development and dealing with trauma, then when they become pregnant we reinforce the trauma and force them to revisit that time in their life by making it the reason their child is being placed on the Child Protection register . The young women feel trapped and unsupported in a system that reportedly saved her from abuse.

2. From the experiences of the young people, you work with, what are the biggest challenge care-experienced parents face and which then leads to them having a child removed?

This is a particularly difficult question to answer as with all young parents there are essentials needed to ensure a safe home, care experienced young women are no different. However, housing, community, family support and finance are very high on the issues they encounter.

Housing – The young women are constantly having to fight to gain appropriate housing, with no family to rely on they are at the mercy of the housing associations who should be part of their corporate parent, however they are often offered inappropriate housing in hostels or bedsits as the local authority want assurance they will need the extra room for their child at the same time the child protection conference and the courts are insisting that they need to be “suitably housed “.

Young women who are moved to mother and baby placement while they are assessed face losing their accommodation as they will not be resident in it for several months

Example – A 21-year-old with her own flat, moved to mother and baby foster placement following the birth of her baby, given assurance that her flat would be safe, informed after 2 weeks that the flat would be cleared and placed in lock up which she would have to pay for as they required the flat for someone else.

Example – a 23-year-old placed in a family hostel, lost her baby due to a still birth, while still in the hospital she was informed she could not return as she would now be a single person, her room was cleared, and her belongings placed in bags essentially declared homeless.

Lack of family / friend support network – These young women have often moved home several times due to changes in foster care placement, this has not allowed them to build strong friendships and links with any community, they often feel labelled by communities as “the Kid in care “. Family contact is minimal and, in some cases, non – existent, when kinship care is mentioned during child protection process, they are lost as the very family that was unable to care for them are now being requested to be assessed to care for their baby?

Relationships – these young women are looking for love and unfortunately this means that they find it in unhealthy controlling relationships, many want to change this but struggle to know how they will cope with no “perceived support / love at all.”

Financial – Once pregnant, the young women must evidence how they will financially cope with bringing a baby into the world. Having lived in care they are often unaware of the importance of bill paying to maintain a household, the benefit system appears to be an almost impossible list of formfilling and lack of personal support.

The young women who try to become financially self sufficient by gaining employment face their own issues see example below:

Example – a young woman had been successful in gaining employment and was using her money to establish a home and save money for the baby. She was then questioned why she was unable to attend all meetings with Local authority (note - she was already ensuring to take time off for her medical appointments). This was marked as an issue in her case notes for the final Child protection meeting.

Continuous Judgement – Due to their involvement with Children’s services which was through no fault of their own they are open book to so many professionals and are continuously judged for their history

Action required - Creation of more mother and baby units/ hostels where the young women and their partners as appropriate are provided with support to develop as parents and individuals by working through their trauma. This type of environment will also provide peer support and the understanding of being part of a community.

Currently there are only 2 hostels and 1 Mother and Baby Mental Health unit in the whole of Wales which between them can only accommodate approximately 25 young women in any one year, none of these are specifically for care experienced young women.

3. Can you tell us about the main types of support you provide to care experienced parents to prevent them being separated from their children? Are interventions by statutory and voluntary services made early enough?

Project Unity provides: -

- One to one support for every young woman.
- Wraparound holistic support – this includes supporting them:
 - Practically, for instance attending appointments, housing applications, finance etc (however if we know there is a Personal Advisor involved, we encourage the young women to work with them regarding these issues – a PA should be involved until they are aged 21, can be extended to 25 if they are in Higher education).
 - Supporting them at medical appointments and emergency hospital appointments – example the young women previously mentioned who gave birth to a still born baby our worker was present as she had no one else.
 - Being their advocate at statutory meetings including court as appropriate.
 - We also provide welfare and wellbeing support this can include listening, being the voice at the end of the phone and signposting where needed.
 - After the age of 16 years unless the young woman has a PA, the social worker is for the unborn /child, project Unity bridge that gap for the young women.
 - Provide Peer Group support initially this was virtual and named by the young women as the “café” with restrictions easing these are becoming physical.
 - Opportunity to have their voices heard by engagement with Children’s commissioner / Plan UK / Welsh women’s aid and research by the University.
 - The most important aspect of Project Unity is that we are independent to any local authority.
- Interventions – regarding our service referral to Project Unity is often very late on, the young women can be in PLO at the point of giving birth or even the week before they are due in court. We are getting referred all the cases that no one else wants to deal with anymore the harsh reality of the young women being at her most vulnerable in their hour of need. Our staff team are extremely passionate about being there to support them at the most vulnerable time.
- This is evidence that the views, wishes and feelings of the young women are not considered by statutory service almost a final thought to ensure they are evidencing “a duty of care”.
- Services that are both statutory and voluntary from mental health to domestic abuse is a postcode lottery across Wales for these young women.

Action Required – Consider an active offer – any young mother who is care experienced is immediately referred to project Unity if pregnant.

4. What evidence is there that the interventions you provide have been successful? How do you monitor outcomes?

Currently we monitor both hard and soft outcomes

Hard – how many of our young women keep their babies – **currently 50% of the young women we work with go on to keep their babies**, we believe if the referrals were received earlier and there was buy in from all Local authorities on the role of the corporate parent this would increase.

Soft – Soft outcomes are essential as they allow the young women to reflect on her journey as well as supporting her to look to the future, at the start of each of their time with us we do a session on Getting to know you this allows the young women to log where she sees her strengths the session outlines

Practical skills – i.e., finding and sharing information/ carrying out tasks/ managing money/ form filling

Interpersonal – i.e., Communication / being part of the community / taking care of me

Attitude – i.e., doing things that matter to me / feeling good about myself/ my confidence / getting on with other / receiving advice

Moving on – i.e., what do I want from life / employment / education

These outcomes are monitored throughout their time with the project, the young women see it as an opportunity for self-reflection and in this respect the outcomes have been amazing

80% of the young women we have worked with see an increase in their confidence / practical skills and their ability to look to the future.

20% have taken up opportunities in further education

30% have gone into employment

5. The Children's Commissioner has told us that finding suitable placements is often challenging, resulting in the young parent and their baby being placed far away from any support networks. She also says that 'parents can be become caught between their own support needs and needing to prove their parenting skills in unfamiliar surroundings, often whilst under intensive scrutiny or assessment'

➤ **Is this a picture you recognise?** Unfortunately, this is a picture we recognise daily.

Currently only 3 Mother and baby Units exist in the whole of Wales and none of this work is specifically with care experienced young women, to date project Unity has worked with over 108 cases and only 1 has ever been in any of these 3 hostels. The outcome of which changed dramatically when she had a still born baby.

The majority of Mother and baby placements are in foster care and although the foster carers are well intentioned the restrictions imposed on the young women and the loneliness they feel does impact on the outcome, many of the young women are moved out of their county away from any familiar surroundings and potential friends and family. Some are moved out of Wales to date we have young women in Birmingham/Taunton/outskirts of London/Manchester.

Example – 16-year-old offered placement in Taunton, she was extremely scared of the prospect of moving so far away but with our support agreed to look at it, after travelling to the placement for an introduction she refused stating “it’s even further than I thought”. As a result, she returned home to mum and the baby is in foster care she sees her 3 times a week and must travel on the bus to see her, she has anxiety issues and post-natal depression. While at the same time still having to deal with meetings/ solicitors and PAMS assessment.

Example – 18-year-old from Cardiff moved to mother and baby foster placement in Torfaen. Her own mother has very little English and relies on her daughter for translation and support, she is torn between being with her baby and supporting her mum who has health needs and therefore could not provide the support she needs. The father of the baby is in Cardiff and she was asked to allow baby to travel to Cardiff with a support worker to a contact centre without her, this journey would take 3 hours including the contact - the placement does not allow her to take baby out alone and she feels lost in what she sees as “a nightmare” which she continues as she loves her baby .

6. Welsh Government has said it is going to ‘strengthen public bodies in their role as ‘corporate parent’:

6a) Why does it seem that corporate parenting is so difficult to deliver?

- We believe it is because there is a lack of understanding around what is the role of a corporate parent. The benefit system, housing sector, anything that is part of statutory system, should have an input as corporate parent.
- There is often a blank response from some areas of local authorities that they have a duty to be a corporate parent for the young parents this may well be as it has not be part of their training and induction?
- We worked closely with Cardiff University on the Corporate parent document with engagement from our young women it has therefore been disappointing to see it has had a better uptake in England, compared to Wales.
- There seems to be a lack of acknowledgement by many of the Local authorities that the Duty of care-to-care experienced young people extends after 16 years.
- We believe there is a need to have core training around the role of the corporate parent to all persons and departments, so everyone is on the same page at the beginning of their journey. This should be offered at induction and on a regular update basis and include the police / courts / social services and judges.

6b) What does Welsh Government need to do to ensure local authorities take on and deliver the 'corporate grandparent' role when care experienced children become parents?

- Welsh Government need to make it mandatory for all relevant departments and agencies associated with Local government receive training on the role of the corporate parent and the impact it will have on long term services for Care experienced young people. This training should include a young person who is care experienced to support the understanding of the impact of being care experienced and the feelings of being unsupported.

7. The Welsh Government says it going to fund advocacy services for parents whose children are at risk of coming into care. To what extent are there all-Wales advocacy services for care experienced young parents whose children are at risk of going into care?

- NYAS is one of two providers across Wales, for statutory advocacy for CYP up to the age of 25.
- We would welcome the opportunity to create an active offer for parents whose child/ren are at risk of coming into care. This must be for both males and females.

8. What sort of specialist advocacy support would be most helpful to care experienced parents to support them up to and during care proceedings?

Project Unity has provided a good model of what is required for care experienced parents, they are traumatised by their own experiences often with no support. They require a support model which is holistic, and trauma informed as they have additional issues that require a bespoke package of support. This must include care experienced fathers.

Support for Fathers – The current support for care experienced young fathers is sporadic and currently no one is offering one to one holistic support including advocacy. Project Unity will be introducing this as of April 2022.

Changing cultures and systemic approaches that exist. Changing the language that we use. It has to come from a support angle and not from a stigmatisation angle.

9. In its Programme for Government, Welsh Government has said it is going to 'explore radical reform of current services for children looked after and care leavers.'

- Is this something you have been asked to be involved in? Yes
- How should a review like this be carried out and who should be involved?
Young care experienced people themselves, providers, LA's, independent organisations, foster carer association, education establishments, health representatives

10. What is the main policy recommendation you would like this Committee to make to Welsh Government?

- Creation of more mother and baby units/ hostels across Wales, where the young women and their partners as appropriate are provided with support to develop as parents and individuals by working through their trauma. This type of environment will also provide peer support and the understanding of being part of a community.
- Consider an active offer – for all care experienced young parents.
- Corporate parent – to bring in all key providers, to come together and provide holistic support for young women.
- Corporate parent - Imbed training around understanding of impact of the care system on care experienced young people – this should take place in all educational establishments training professionals i.e. social workers, judges, health visitors/midwives, police. And all inductions in Local authority for all departments. housing etc.
- Expand the offer of service provision for both parents.
- We would welcome some further clarity around the offer of financial support for young people – how will this impact their additional benefits?

11. What could be the potential outcome of these changes?

- Drive and support a reduction in numbers of children entering care in Wales and reduced involvement with the child protection system.
- Ensure that care-experienced young mothers and expectant mothers are empowered to have their voice heard and can influence policy and practice which impacts on this marginalised group.
- Improve the wellbeing of care-experienced mothers, expectant mothers, and children in Wales.
- Address a diverse range of inequalities experienced by care-experienced young women, including poverty, homelessness, health and mental health, employability, and educational attainment.
- Provide cost savings to local authorities by reducing demand on their services and preventing escalation of child protection proceedings.
- Reduce the impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences for the next generation of children.
- Expectant mothers are prepared and receive the necessary support to be equipped to be a good parent.

Messages from Project Unity

Young care experienced mothers aspire to enter employment, training, or education but they don't have the resources to do so

There is lack of preparation and planning for care experienced young women to become parents

Young women tell us they need emotional and practical support to feel emotionally equipped to parent, and feel let down by a system they are not in by choice, and which has not taught them how to be parents

We know they lack community networks and can be socially isolated, having no or minimal positive family networks and for some, abusive ex-partners

They feel under immense scrutiny and judgement during parent assessments, often feeling stigmatised and discriminated against because of their care-experienced status.

Many do not understand decisions being made and have no-one on their side to navigate the child protection system in which they find themselves

Many of the young people are still dealing with the trauma of their past, and have not received the necessary therapeutic support to deal with these issues

There is inconsistent quality in the publicly funded legal advice and representation young women have accessed in Wales

Further Information provided by Project Unity as part of reporting to Welsh Government.

Through our experience and current delivery of Project Unity, NYAS Cymru has seen the greater need for young mums to access emergency financial support for basic items such as food, healthcare products and travel. Applications for financial assistance have been supported by the project via the benefits systems, however this will have a long-term wider impact on the monthly income of young mothers, when it comes to repay these loans.

Many young mums are not in the financial situation to provide all necessary safeguarding equipment needed for the home. In some cases, this is highlighted as a requirement in regard to meeting the outcomes of the child protection or care and support plans.

Due the restrictions of COVID 19 and the implementation of social distancing within food superstores several our young care experienced mums are unable to access stores to benefit from discounted bulk buying of food and essential items, due to the lack of family support and childcare arrangements. Therefore, they are forced to shop locally where essential items have inflated costs resulting the little benefit they receive not going as far as it was previously.

Where children have been removed attending contact with their children is pivotal to maintain the parent child relationship. Young care experienced mums/expectant mums are telling us this has been difficult due to the restrictions imposed by the pandemic and the lack of digital resources, data costs and broadband capabilities they have at their disposable. This has also provided a barrier for their connection with services and partaking in decision making meetings regarding their child/children therefore infringing on their rights as young people and parents.

Concerns have also been raised regarding travel costs and how young care experienced mothers are expected to purchase travel passes and claim monies back from children services departments, which on occasion can take time thus resulting in not having enough disposal income to attend contact or essential appointments regarding their children, which if not attended is seen in a negative light by children service departments.

The turbulent crisis of Covid-19 has offered a particularly challenging time for our care experienced young mothers and expectant mothers. Nationwide measures to limit the spread of the virus have put a huge strain and pressure not only on the care experienced young mothers and expectant mothers, but also on the way we had envisaged delivering our grant.

NYAS Cymru have seen first-hand the greater need for young mums to access emergency financial items such as food, healthcare, and travel to and from medical appointments. It has been challenging for the young mums accessing Project Unity to budget for essential items. Wherever possible, we have attempted to support the best we can in the given circumstances. We have been encouraging the care experienced young mothers and pregnant women to speak to the Project Coordinator for Project Unity to gain access for any key items they require, whether that be technological equipment – to allow them to have the best possible means of communicating with family and/or authorities, if need be, baby boxes – to provide essential items for the baby as well as hygiene items for themselves.

Some of the issues that have arisen with the young women we have supported have included:

- Dealing with domestic violence from an existing partner or former partner - this can often impact on the young women's self-confidence, mental and emotional health including depression, anxiety and other emotional distress and psychological trauma.
- It also has an impact on the decision of children's services to allow the baby to stay with mum after delivery and therefore many are removed at birth to foster care, this reinforces the trauma experienced by the young women and her feelings that she is not "good enough".

With the current situation of the pandemic this impacts on her contact and many of our young women have been having limited contact with their babies often only virtually.

- The increased level of emotional and psychological support that has been required due to existing mental health issues and anxiety.

As a project we have made referrals to organisations such as MIND due to the lack of mental health support available.

- The need to support with practical issues, such as housing and financial matters, due to learning difficulties and having a lack of confidence – many young mothers are requesting support to access financial support with some noting they depend on food banks. A high number of young mothers require support to complete grants for financial support from the Government. e.g., DAF Grant (Discretionary Assistance Fund).
- Building relationships with Social Services. There is often a fractured relationship between many of the Unity service users and social services. This is often due to poor communication and misunderstanding as well as historic treatment as children themselves in the care system. This has been exacerbated by the current public health crisis and the seemingly increased volume of work. We're often able to resolve the issues with clear communication and understanding.
- Services including substance misuse, domestic abuse and mental health differ from one local authority to another including the referral into such services, as a project we are aiming to track the impact this is having on our young women and their ability to keep their babies.
- Young women who are care experienced have experienced huge trauma in their own lives and yet when they discover they are pregnant many states they feel they "disappear" the only thing that is important is their baby, although they all state they understand this the services to them as individuals from statutory agencies are withdrawn. Many young women say that enhancing these services would provide the support of the corporate parent to in turn enable them to parent.

Additional information

- Numbers of young women that we have supported in Project Unity – how many of the unborn children/born children were part of child protection procedure:

Project Unity has now worked with 108 young women across Wales all their children have been part of the child protection procedure many at the point of PLO.

- What were the common themes for the women we support – to try and scrutinise the cases to see what evidence we have:

The main themes affecting the young women we support is

Mental Health – always associated with trauma from Adverse childhood experiences often with no therapy.

Lack of family support – having grown up in care they are often estranged from family, some are fortunate to have good ex foster carers but unfortunately some have landed up in unhealthy relationships due to wanting to be loved!

Confidence issues – Lack of belief that they are worth anything, the stigma of being the child from care, not fitting in often rejected by communities. This brings many of them to Drug and alcohol issues to block adverse memories.

Drug related issues due to all explained above

Housing – Lack of appropriate housing often being placed in hostels where they either become involved in the gang or drug culture or are rejected and land up sofa surfing which then leads LAs to refuse further housing.

Finance – Lack of understanding of budgeting and maintaining a home with no role models.

Education – A fear of the education system where they felt unsupported.

- Breakdown of the figures of where the young women are placed – can we find out where the mother and baby units are across Wales and how many of our young women are placed across Wales:

Currently there are 3 Mother and Bay hostels in Wales – North/Cardiff and Swansea
The Swansea unit recently added and called the Hope Unit is specifically for mothers with Mental Health needs it can take 6 mothers at one time from 32 weeks to the age of 1 year.
This means that places are prime and limited.

To date only 1 of our young women has been in any of these 3 units and was asked to leave after her baby was still born.

- **How many have been offered placements in England**

Of the 108 - 30 young women have been offered placements in England of these only 10 took them up and 5 failed due to distance and lack of support locally

- **Demographic data on the backgrounds of the young women – do we think there is any discrimination faced by marginalised young women that we support**

To date we have worked with young women from a different cultures and ethnicity, these have been in the Newport/Cardiff and Swansea LA's. All have received translators where required and we have not highlighted any differences to the other young women we work with to date.

One young woman has told us that her own mother has experienced issues with getting translation and advocacy as she lives in an area not currently providing parent advocacy and is out of our age range. She too has just given birth to a baby and is involved in Child protection and does not have English as her first language.