

Senedd Cymru | Welsh Parliament

Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg | Children, Young People and Education Committee

Gwasanaethau i blant sydd wedi bod mewn gofal: archwilio diwygio radical | Services for care experienced children: exploring radical reform

Ymateb gan Voices From Care Cymru | Evidence from Voices From Care Cymru

Introduction

Voices From Care Cymru is Wales' leading charity upholding the rights of care experienced children and young people. A key component of our role is enabling care experienced children and young people to get their voices heard where decisions are made that affect them. We are a children's rights organisation, dedicated to ensuring that children and young people affected by the care system have their rights, as set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and incorporated into Welsh law and policy, fully realised.

We strongly welcome the Committee's Inquiry and all pleased to be able to present evidence.

When the Programme for Government was published following the last Senedd election we were pleased to see that the Labour Party manifesto commitment to exploring radical reform of services for the care experienced community was included.

We have long received support from Welsh Government to enable us to support care experienced young people to have input into specific areas of Welsh Government policy development. We were pleased to be invited to enable young people's participation in the development of, for example, the Basic Income Pilot and the Government's policy to remove private profit from the provision of care to children and young people. We were keen to ensure that the voices of care experienced children and young people were at the centre of any process established by Welsh Government to explore radical reform. We examined, with advice from our partner agencies in the appropriate jurisdictions, the review processes that had taken place recently in Scotland and in England. We concluded that neither model provided an appropriate blueprint for the exploration of radical reform here in Wales. The Scottish process, while initially exhaustive and inclusive, was very time consuming and expensive and in the view of our colleagues has failed to deliver real change. There is also a perception that young people have completely lost control of the process. While there is much to commend in the report of the English Review there is little evidence of political will to deliver on its findings, and there is widespread concern that it will remain essentially a theoretical exercise.

We held discussions with Welsh Government officials and with the Deputy Minister for Social Services. We facilitated a meeting between the Deputy Minister and a group of care experienced young people in Llandudno. As a result of these discussions the Deputy Minister commissioned us to facilitate a process that would enable care experienced children and young people to work with Welsh Ministers to identify what radically reformed services would look and feel like to care experienced children and young people and their families. She asked us to prepare for and organise a Summit meeting between care experienced children and young people and Welsh Ministers.

The Process

Over the summer of 2022 we consulted with care experienced children and young people across Wales. We contacted them through our own existing network and members, our partners in the third sector and local authority children services. We attended summer events, organised 8 workshops, supported by some additional online discussions. We recruited a core group of 40 young people to act as Young Ambassadors and represent their community at the summit meeting.

Through this consultation process we discussed with young people the true meaning of the words **radical** and **reform**. Using their own experiences of the care system itself and of wider services available to children and young people they identified failings in the current systems, positives in the current systems and began to develop a vision of what radically reformed services would look and feel like to care experienced children and young people.

We agreed with Welsh Government that it was essential that's the Summit resulted in a usable 'product' - a document upon which progress towards radical reform could be built. We agreed to call this document a Declaration, in line with the Declarations that are agreed at international Summit meetings.

Working with the Young Ambassadors, drawing on the findings of this consultation, and of a previous consultation we undertook to develop the Voices From Care Cymru Manifesto for the 2021 Senate election we drafted the Declaration.

The Summit was scheduled to take place in Cardiff on September the 10th 2022.

Unfortunately, due to the death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, it had to be postponed. It was rescheduled for Saturday the 3rd of December 2022. We used the delay to deepen our understanding of the issues facing some care experienced young people - for example care experienced young asylum seekers - and to further prepare Young Ambassadors to take part.

33 Young Ambassadors debated the Draft Declaration with the Deputy Minister for Social Services, the Deputy Minister for Mental Health and Well-being, the Minister for Social Justice and the Minister for Education. Ministers and Young Ambassadors then presented their findings to the First Minister who responded. Young Ambassadors and Ministers agreed the draft Declaration, with minor amendments. The Declaration is currently being re drafted, and will be formally signed and published soon.

We are not yet able to share the full Declaration with the Committee, as it is subject to further ratification by Young Ambassadors and Ministers. However, we set out below the main findings of the consultation.

Findings

Voice

Care experienced young people told us that they often do not feel listened to. They told us the adults did not always understand that it could be difficult for them to express their views and to tell the whole truth. They felt it was important that even very little children should be supported to speak out. They felt it was important that when a child or young person's wishes and feelings could not be agreed to because it wasn't safe that people should explain to them why, and what would happen.

They told us that when they raised concerns about how they were being cared for those concerns were not always properly investigated, and the outcomes we're not always explained.

Some care experienced young people had had positive experiences of advocacy. Other young people could not remember being offered advocacy at all. Those who had had positive experiences expressed a wish to be able to stay in touch with their advocate so that they did not have to keep explaining issues again and again to new people. Some young people had found it hard to trust advocates because they did not believe that they were truly independent of social services.

Coming into Care

Some care experienced young people felt that if their families had received more help and support they might have been able to stay with them. They suggested that families should have access to independent advocacy to help and support them, but also stressed that children and young people should have their independent advocates too, to make sure that their voices were heard.

They explained that they believed it was important that if a child is taken into care services continue to work with the family, and with the child to try to make it possible for the family to be reunited. They stressed that children and young people should be listened to if they said they did not want to go home. They believed that professionals should stay in touch with children and families that had been subject to care proceedings to make sure that the children continued to be safe and well and happy.

They believe that once a child or young person is taken into care, professionals should continue to work with the family. They explained that they believe this because those families might go on to have more children who they might be able to look after well if they were helped, and also because when care experienced young people are old enough they often want to be in touch with, and sometimes live with their birth families.

In Care.

Care experienced children and young people had a range of experiences with regard to staying in touch with birth families after being taken into care. Most wanted to be able to stay in touch if it was safe, and they wanted people to explain to them why they couldn't, if it wasn't safe or if family members were not prepared to stay in touch. However, some young people reported feeling pressurised to stay in contact when they didn't want to. Contact with brothers and sisters was a big issue for many young people. For example, some reported letterbox contact that had worked well until they were 18 falling apart after that.

Many young people reported that they had never had it properly explained to them why they had been taken into care. They knew it could be hard, but they felt professionals should explain, even to quite young children and young people.

They told us that many people working with them, from foster carers to teachers, did not understand that even if the care experience for a child or young person was positive, the very process of being taken into care is always traumatic. They believed that it was very important that people should be trained to understand the impacts of trauma, and to know that these impacts might be felt by a young person long after they had been taken into care.

Many care experienced young people reported being placed in care a long way away from their school, their community and their friends. They described how disruptive this was, particularly if it was followed by many other moves. They believe that the system should be designed so that children and young people can stay as close as possible to home when they are taken into care, and that they should only be moved far away if there is a serious risk to their safety.

Many young people reported very positive experiences of fostering. They described loving and supportive foster carers who had made huge differences to their lives. Many continued to be in contact with their foster carers long after leaving care. However, there were some issues.

Young people told us that sometimes foster carers did not display the right values and behaviours to enable young people to grow and thrive. Some young people had experienced prejudice and discrimination from foster carers. They believe that care needed to be taken when recruiting foster carers to ensure that they do have the right values and behaviours. They believe that foster carers' training should be regularly updated, and that they need training to support the different needs of children and young people with protected characteristics. Young people understood that there was a shortage of foster carers in many areas, and they believe that it should be a high priority for more foster carers to be recruited. They reported having to move a number of times before they found the right foster carers, and most believed that that was because there were not enough foster carers for young people to be properly matched to begin with. They believe that it is very important for foster carers to be paid fairly and to receive enough support. Some were angry that kinship carers are paid less than other foster carers. Others were upset because they had found out the carers will be paid more if a child or young person that they're looking after is labelled as 'difficult'. Young people really disliked being labelled like that. Some

reported being very unhappy about their care being, as one young person put it 'auctioned off to the lowest bidder'. They believed but any money spent on their care should be actually used for that purpose, and not for private profit.

Young people told us that fostering doesn't work for everyone. Some reported positive experiences of residential homes, others felt that young people in residential settings were sometimes treated less favourably than those in foster care. They wanted a range of options to be available, and for their placements to be stable. Some of the issues about the need for staff training, and for staff with the right values to be recruited that are outlined below were of particular importance to young people in residential settings.

Care experienced children and young people had a wide range of experiences and views about the staff that had worked with them. Many reported very positive experiences. One young man described his social worker as having been 'the person who first showed me what a good man could be.' Older care experienced young people often reported positive experiences with their PAs, with staff doing their best to be available whenever the young people needed them, being flexible, I'm just one young person said 'she never gives up on me'.

However there were issues. Young people reported frequent changes of social worker, often with no hand over. They described how distressing it was to have to keep telling their story again and again to new people. Some young people had similar experiences with PA's, saying that they sometimes didn't know from one week to the next who their PA was or how to contact them. Young people knew that there were shortages of staff, and they understood that the roles could be challenging. They were clear that values and skills were more important than formal training. They said what they needed most from staff was empathy, understanding, and patience.

Care experienced young people told us that they wanted to feel 'normal', and that there were things in the way that the current system operates that stopped them feeling like other children and young people. For example, many reported parents of their friends having to be police checked before they could stay with their friends; this despite national guidance having been changed to allow foster carers to make those decisions under many circumstances. Some young people were very uncomfortable with the way in which foster carers were expected to keep records even if the child or young person had been living with them for many years. They felt this reminded them that they were not, as one young person said, 'really part of the family'. Practical things, like the timings of meetings, also got in the way of everyday life. Young people really disliked having their formal LAC reviews take place in school during school hours. They reported being taken out of lessons to attend these meetings in front of all their friends, and, as one young person said:

'Everyone sees people in suits turning up. They know it is to discuss you. It makes you feel weird. And you miss lessons. Why can't we have meetings when we are not supposed to be in school - holiday times or after 4:00 o'clock?'

Some young people reported not being invited to meetings, or not being helped to prepare for them. Many young people believed that services needed to be more flexible, so that they were there when children and young people needed them.

Care experienced young people understood that, for example, certain records needed to be kept, but they wanted the system to change to make their lives as 'normal' as possible.

Care experienced young asylum seekers told us but their access to education was very limited. They wanted to be able to learn English as quickly as possible and they wanted to be able to choose whether face to face learning or online learning was best for them they wanted to be able to learn life skills to help them understand the community that they are living in. They wanted to have the same support as that provided to other care experienced children and young people, and they wanted to receive the same financial support as other care experienced young people. They wanted to be treated in the same way and to receive the same support wherever they live in Wales.

Education

Some care experienced young people had had really positive experiences in education. For them school was a safe place, and being moved to a different school if they had to move placements was really distressing and negative. Some individual teachers had made a huge difference.

However, many young people reported feeling that their schools did not understand the challenges that they were facing. They felt that staff had not received the right training to enable them to understand the trauma that young people had experienced and the effect of that trauma on them. Some reported staff having low expectations of them because of their care experienced background. . Some had experienced stigma and bullying, not only from fellow pupils but from staff. They believed that staff needed proper training, and that care experienced young people should be involved in delivering that training. Many believed that schools and colleges should make more effort to ensure that care experienced students understand the opportunities that may be available to them, and that they get access to those opportunities. This includes access to good quality work experience and to information about apprenticeships and training, and about university. Young people believed that care experienced students needed this extra support because they may not have family members and others in their lives who can provide access to this knowledge and these opportunities in the way that other pupils may have.

Many of those young people who had been able to get to university reported good support. Some universities make impressive efforts to ensure that they provide opportunities to enable care experienced young people to attend, and to stay at university. However, some young people had struggled, for example with access to accommodation in holiday times. Young people believed that the good practise at some universities ought to be shared and that Welsh Government should require universities to support care experienced and young people.

Leaving Care.

Some young people had had positive experiences of leaving care and had felt supported. They had begun to learn life skills, like budgeting and cooking, long before they had to leave their foster placement. They had strong supportive relationships with their PAs, which had helped them find suitable places to live and to develop positive relationships in their communities. Some had been able to stay with their foster carers beyond their 18th birthdays, using the When I'm Ready Scheme. Some had been able to get places at university and had been supported to keep them. Some had been able to access apprenticeships in public sector organisations, designated for care leavers, and had been supported in those roles.

However, too many young people told us that they had not had enough support to help them learn to live independently. They reported being housed in inadequate hostel accommodation without support. Many young people had never heard of the When I'm Ready Scheme. Of those who had, and who had wanted to stay with their foster carers barriers, including financial barriers had made this impossible even when the foster carers really wanted the young people to be able to stay with them. They believed that foster carers should all be made aware of the When I'm Ready scheme, that the financial arrangements should be made simpler, and that the Scheme should work the same way everywhere in Wales. Young people in residential care felt that it was unfair that there was no similar scheme available to them to enable them to stay in the community that they were familiar with, and continue to get some support from care home staff. Some young people told us that they had turned to alcohol or other drugs to self medicate. They also told us of friends who had become involved in unlawful activities, partly because involvement and things like county lines provided them with some kind of community. They believed that there was a need for more PAs, for PAs to be better trained and supported, and for support not only to be available between 9 and 5 on weekdays. Many young people told us that support from third sector organisations had made a huge difference to them. Some believed that those organisations should be better resourced and supported.

Access to mental health support was a big issue for care experienced young people. Many reported difficulties with moving to adult services when they turned 18. They also reported very long waiting times to access child and adolescent services when they were younger. Young people believed that care experienced young people should have priority in mental health services because of the trauma that they have experienced.

Many care experienced young people felt that support should continue to be available, certainly until they are 25 and beyond. As one young person said:

‘Would you stop looking after your kids, just because they were past their 25th birthday?’

One suggestion was that there should be a phone number that care experienced people could phone when they were over 25 if they needed support and advice.

General

Care experienced children and young people reported experiencing stigma at many stages in their lives, in education, in their communities, in accessing services like housing, and in employment. They believe that any programme of radical reform must have action to tackle stigma at its heart will stop

Care experience children and young people told us but there is too much variation between how care experienced children and young people are supported across Wales. They believe but how well they are cared for and supported should never depend on where they live, and that they should be provided with the best care and support wherever they are.

They also reported often feeling that decisions were made that affected their lives by people who did not know them or understand them. They would like everyone who decides things that affect their lives to spend time getting to know them and understand them. They want to be listened to, and they want people to act on what they have to say, or explain properly why they can't do so.

Conclusion and Next Steps.

Much of what care experienced children and young people told us through this consultation is not new. This presents a major challenge. It is clear from what we have been told that there is much good practise, but that it is not routinely shared and too often depends on the determination and goodwill of individual local decision makers or frontline pack practitioners. Despite the good intentions of national guidance, local delivery for care experienced children and young people varies, and it is clear that some aspects of national policy, for example the When I'm Ready Scheme, are not effectively monitored and not consistently delivered. This must change.

The Summit draft Declaration does not attempt to set out a blueprint of how services should be transformed. Rather it sets out a vision of how services will look and feel to care experienced children and young people and their families once radical reform has taken place. Once the Declaration is signed there will be a programme of work engaging professionals with the delivery of the Declaration. Young Ambassadors and Ministers will work together to engage professionals in this process, and to monitor progress. The intention is to hold a further Summit in 12 months' time to assess progress.

Following the Summit young people have told us that they believe is that Welsh Ministers have really heard and understood them, and are truly committed to undertaking the radical reform needed to transform the lives of care experienced children and young people.

In addition to any specific recommendations the Committee may wish to make about specific services we would invite the Committee to consider asking the Welsh Government to commit to some core principles. We believe that it is essential that care experienced children and young people continue to have a central voice in the process of radical reform. We believe radical reform should deliver consistent, high quality services across the whole of Wales, and that, while there is a need for flexibility to meet local needs and circumstances, the care and support a child or young person receives should never depend on where in Wales they live. We believe that it will be essential for Welsh Government to

closely monitor the delivery of the programme of radical reform, and to ensure but sufficient robust information is collected to enable that monitoring to be effective. We believe that at the heart of radical reform must be action to tackle the stigma that care experienced children and young people face and to end it.

We hope that the Committee will be able, in addition to undertaking this very important Inquiry, to continue to monitor the Welsh Government delivery on its commitment to radical reform of services, and to continue to engage with care experienced young people as part of that monitoring process.