

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 Dyneiddwyr Cymru | Evidence from Wales Humanists

Before care: Safely reducing the number of children in the care system

Please outline a maximum of three top priorities for radical reform of services for safely reducing the number of children in the care system.

Priority 1

N/a

Priority 2

N/a

Priority 3

N/a

In care: Quality services and support for children in care

Please outline a maximum of three top priorities for radical reform of services for children in care.

Priority 1

Reform of the School Admissions Code to prioritise all care experienced children in faith school admissions.

All state-funded schools are required by the School Admissions Code to prioritise the admission of children who are or were in care (formally known as looked after and previously looked after children) in their admission arrangements. This requirement reflects the fact that many care experienced children start from a position of considerable disadvantage, which places a duty on schools and other public institutions to actively promote their education and development.

However, faith schools are exempt from the requirement to prioritise the admission

of all of these children. Instead, they can prioritise children from families who share the faith of the school, regardless of whether they are or were in care, over care experienced children who do not share the faith of the school. This is laid out in section 2.32 of the Code:

‘Admission authorities for schools with a designated religious character (faith schools) may give first priority to all looked after children and previously looked after children, whether or not of the faith but must give first priority to looked after children and previously looked after children of their faith above any other children of their faith. If they give first priority to looked after children and

previously looked after children of the faith, then they must give a higher priority to looked after children and previously looked after children not of the faith than other children not of that faith.'

In other words, state-funded faith schools, unlike other schools, have a choice as to whether they give priority in their admissions policies to all of these highly vulnerable children or just to those who adhere to their faith.

To determine how prevalent this practice is, we undertook an analysis of all of the oversubscription criteria for primary and secondary schools with a religious character in Wales. Our preliminary findings suggest that 83% of Roman Catholic primary schools give some kind of priority to baptised children, often those who are not care experienced, over care experienced children who are not of the faith. In Roman Catholic secondary schools, the figure is somewhat lower, but 40% still discriminate against care experienced children not of the faith. Only 9% of Church in Wales primaries operate this kind of hierarchy amongst care experienced children, and there are no Church in Wales secondaries that do so. However, taken together, these findings mean that almost a third of Welsh faith schools are choosing to make use of a provision that allows them to discriminate against some of the most vulnerable children in society.

Further, our research (which is not fully completed but will be published later this year) established that many schools are currently operating policies that do not comply with the Admissions Code. This is because, although their oversubscription criteria prioritise care experienced children within each category, these categories include children from other Christian denominations, who are prioritised over children from other (or non-) religious backgrounds. If taken to its logical conclusion, a policy like this would give children from (e.g.) non-Catholic Christian backgrounds who are not care experienced priority over care experienced children from other and non-religious backgrounds, flying in the face of the stipulation that schools 'must give a higher priority to looked after children and previously looked after children not of the faith than [any] other children not of that faith.'

It should not matter what faith background a care experienced child has. All such children deserve to attend the school that would best suit them. On this basis, we ask the Committee to recommend that this discriminatory policy be abolished and all care experienced children given top priority in school admissions regardless of the type of school they attend.

Priority 2

N/a

Priority 3

N/a

After care: On-going support when young people leave care

Please outline a maximum of three top priorities for radical reform of the on-going support provided when young people leave care.

Priority 1

Reform of the School Admissions Code to prioritise all care experienced children in faith school admissions (for details, see response to question on services and support for children in care).

Priority 2

N/a

Priority 3

N/a

Anything else

Wales Humanists is part of Humanists UK, the national charity working on behalf of non-religious people. As such, many of the important issues that this consultation raises fall somewhat outwith our policy remit. Nevertheless, in our response, we raise one vital issue which would very much help to improve the lives of non-religious care experienced children and their families; namely, school admissions policies. More specifically, the admissions policies of denominational (or faith) schools.

Although there has been little research conducted on admissions in the Welsh context, there is a wealth of robust evidence (see note 1) showing that, even without the discrimination against care experienced children we highlight in our response to question 12 (and 15), religious selection not only separates pupils by religion and belief, but also along ethnic and socio-economic lines, as well as by prior attainment. In practice, this means that disadvantaged, vulnerable pupils are less likely to get a place at these schools, which tend to be less representative of their local areas than schools that do not select in this way.

Further, as studies that control for pupil background show (see note 2), it is primarily religious selectivity, rather than a faith ethos, that accounts for any enhanced levels of attainment or performance that faith schools appear to have (e.g. in national league tables). Nevertheless, the raw data tends to fuel the idea that faith schools are 'better' than other types of school and encourages parents (particularly the highly educated and those from more advantaged socio-economic groups) to use all the means at their disposal to gain a place, thus perpetuating a self-fulfilling prophecy.

With this in mind, to fully address the needs of vulnerable pupils, including those who are care experienced, the Welsh Government should consider abolishing faith-based oversubscription policies in their entirety. However, failing this, we re-emphasise the need to remove the exemption to the Admissions Code that allows religious schools to discriminate against looked after and previously looked after children who do not share the faith in favour of much less vulnerable children from faith backgrounds and, instead, prioritise all care experienced children in school admissions.

Note 1: For an overview see Fair Admissions Campaign (2017) 'Research into religiously selective admissions criteria' <https://fairadmissions.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/2017-08-29-FINAL-Religious-Selection-Research-Survey.pdf> and Accord Coalition, Databank of Independent Evidence on Faith Schools (2021) <http://accordcoalition.org.uk/research/>

Note 2: See Education Policy Institute (2016) 'Faith Schools pupil performance, and social selection' <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/faith-schools-pupil-performance-social-selection/>, or Stephen Gibbons and Olmo Silva (2006) 'Faith Primary Schools: Better Schools or Better Pupils?', Discussion Paper No. 72 from the Centre for the Economics of Education (CEE) at CEP <https://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/CEE/ceedp72.pdf>, or Humanists UK (2019) 'Secondary league tables unfairly benefit religious schools by ignoring pupil backgrounds say academics' <https://humanism.org.uk/2019/01/24/secondary-league-tables-unfairly-benefit-religious-schools-by-ignoring-pupil-backgrounds-say-academics/>
