

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 Plant yng Nghymru, gydag aelodau o'r Grŵp Polisi Elusennau Plant Cenedlaethol, ac ar eu rhan: Barnardo's Cymru, Comisiynydd Plant Cymru (sylwedyddion), Plant yng Nghymru, NSPCC Cymru, NYAS Cymru a Chymdeithas y Plant | Evidence from Children in Wales, with and on behalf of the National Children's Charities Policy Group members Barnardo's Cymru, Children's Commissioner for Wales (Observers), Children in Wales, NSPCC Cymru, NYAS Cymru and The Children's Society

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

Tackling the impact of poverty & the cost of living crisis on children and families

Child poverty levels are increasing in Wales and the cost of living crisis is putting added pressures on many families already struggling to provide the very best for their children. Some children in low-income households, disproportionately impacted by the recent pandemic, will face particular stresses, tensions and anxieties linked to the day-to-day reality of being in families struggling to meet their basic needs. Children need to be protected from poverty and not be at increased risk of experiencing family breakdown and disruption, or face periods of housing instability or periods in care. We do not wish to see children entering state care where poverty is a factor in the decision to remove a child. The Welsh Government's refresh of their Child Poverty Strategy provides an opportunity to ensure that there is a particular focus on children at risk, including actions to address the relationship between poverty and child abuse and neglect, ensuring that steps are taken to address both income poverty and material deprivation, as well as ensuring that services are routinely available in situations where interventions are required or would be beneficial to achieve stability.

Priority 2

Universal and Targeted support services

All children should have access to a broad range of universal services, alongside more specialist provision for those children and families who could benefit from additional intervention and support. We are concerned that early intervention and preventative services are vulnerable to budget cuts, despite many services, including those delivered by the Children's Third Sector, receiving positive evaluations and contributing to safely reducing the need for children to come into care or stay longer than is necessary. Such services, including family support, edge of care services and services which address parental conflict and domestic abuse, should be better protected, valued

and expanded, and we would welcome a clear vision from the Welsh Government for better early intervention across Wales. We are equally concerned with the number of children entering care with care experienced parents, and call upon the Welsh Government to introduce a plan which outlines steps it will take to address this and support care experienced parents already in the system

Priority 3

Child protection system

The child protection system is under increased pressure with 2,470 children on the child protection register at March 2022. The report from the child practice review following the tragic death of Logan Mwangi, found deep rooted practice issues locally, including a lack of appropriate information sharing arrangements between agencies and poor professional confidence in reporting concerns. Calls have been made for the Welsh Government to outline steps it will take to improve practice across Wales, with the function and accountability of the Regional Safeguarding Boards crucial to strengthening current arrangements.

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

Services and support for care experienced children

All care experienced children should have access to information and an entitlement to a range of support services and opportunities throughout their time in care, provided by a range of public bodies as part of their corporate parenting duties. All public bodies as corporate parents should be required to sign the Corporate Parenting Charter (upon pending release) and should be named in revised statutory legislation being planned. Many children would benefit hugely from access to emotional and therapeutic support services, including CAMHs when required, to help address mental health difficulties and address past exposure to abuse and neglect. There is an urgent need to ensure there is continuity of support (including financial) when care experienced children transition to adult mental health services or move to another area. Care experienced children should routinely have an active offer to independent advocacy support, including children with complex needs, disabled children and all children in residential settings. An active offer should also be extended to ensure that all children have an entitlement to an Independent Visitor befriender scheme. All care experienced children should also be able to maintain positive and healthy relationships with family and friends, including their siblings.

Priority 2

Placements – choice, stability and child involvement

All care experienced children should be placed in suitable and appropriate placements, which provide a stable and nurturing environment to enable them to thrive. Placement moves due to poor matching and breakdown are disruptive for children in respect of their education, health and ability

to establish and maintain relationships. Children should be routinely involved in all decisions, including matters relating to where they will live. There is a need to enhance choice and availability of local placements near to a child's home where this is in their best interest, and expand foster and kinship care arrangements. Where children are placed away from their home area (out of county), information sharing processes should be robust to ensure that the receiving local authority has all the necessary information at hand to meet a child's health, housing and education needs. No child should be placed in accommodation which is not subject to registration, or placed in unregulated accommodation. For children who go missing from care, there should be a statutory requirement that return interviews are conducted.

Priority 3

Workforce issues

Statutory children's services have experienced significant capacity and budgetary pressures during the past decade and have been described as being in crisis on more than one occasion. Many children report having several social workers during their care journey which is not only disruptive for the child, but also detrimental for the workforce in terms of impeding their ability to adequately carry out their duties and functions. We are concerned that with the added pressures brought about by the cost of living crisis and the number of children entering the care system, is placing the current system under significant and unsustainable pressure

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

Supported high quality housing options

All children leaving care should have access to a range of high quality housing options that provide a stable environment to enable a safe transition to adulthood and which helps achieve permanency. The standard of accommodation and support received can vary greatly, from When I Am Ready placements, semi-independent living arrangements to hotels and B&B. We question how suitable some of these placements and unregulated housing options are for vulnerable young people leaving care, some of whom will be at greater risk of exploitation or going missing. We do not have a clear picture of their use, and call upon the Welsh Government to address this as a matter of priority.

Priority 2

After care advice, support and information

Care leavers should routinely have an entitlement to greater and more consistent forms of support, advice and information throughout their life journey, recognising that as the 'care' element is withdrawn, the needs of young people and their vulnerability increases, especially for those without a robust family and friends support network in place. Currently there is no strategy in place to

support care leavers beyond 25. Whilst we welcome to commitment to ensure that all young people have access to a named Personal Advisor until they are 25, we call for this to be prioritised and action accelerated. Care leavers could also benefit from an extension of the Independent Visitor befriending scheme to help address loneliness and isolation upon leaving care.

Priority 3

Financial support and employment

The Basic Income Pilot is a valuable initiative in contributing towards ensuring that care leavers are not financially disadvantaged when leaving care, and we as an alliance of children's third sector charities have been hugely supportive of this programme and are looking forward to the results of the independent evaluation which is now underway. We would wish to see this progress beyond being a pilot, and for there to be a long term commitment from the Welsh Government to the programme to ensure it becomes fully embedded. We would also wish to see the programme be expanded to provide more holistic, wrap-around financial and employment/education/training offer for care leavers alongside the current financial package. Meanwhile, the Welsh Government should ensure that all eligible care leavers receive their entitlement through this scheme, including Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children.

Anything else

Eliminating profit from the care of children looked after

Whilst we support proposals to explore ways in which the current system can be rebalanced, we are concerned about the timeframes within which the primary aims of the proposal are expected to be achieved – specifically, that new providers of children's social care registering with Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) must have 'not-for-profit' status from April 2026; and that any 'for-profit' providers will need to transition to having 'not-for-profit' status, and register with CIW as having such status, by April 2027. We believe that these timeframes do not provide enough time for providers and other stakeholders to reach these aims, or do not provide enough time for these aims to be reached safely. The Welsh Government should make longer the timeframe within which 'for-profit' providers who want to transition to becoming 'not-for-profit' providers are able to make that transition. For 'not-for-profit' providers who want to expand but do not have the capacity to do so, or for 'not-for-profit' providers who are unsure about expanding, Welsh Government need to incentivise these providers to expand, and support them throughout the process of expansion.