

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 | Evidence from Children in Wales

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## 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

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Early intervention and prevention services – investment, protection and extension of universal services and preventive programme

Investment and extension of preventative support services and programmes for families can make a crucial difference to children's lives and alleviate the need for more costly and extensive support for families and children at a later stage. Research suggests cutbacks to preventative children's services for children from 12 years old had a direct correlation with numbers of 16-17 year olds coming into care. The findings suggested for every £10 reduction in spending an additional 1.9 per 100,000 young people 16-17 years olds entered care. (Bennett, Web et al, 2021).

We have concerns that many services commissioned by public bodies for delivery by children's third sector organisations across Wales are perpetually vulnerable to budget cuts, despite many services receiving positive evaluations and are highly valued by children and families. Despite contributing to preventing the need for many children coming into care, or having to stay longer than is absolutely necessary, such services are not afforded the same legislative protections afforded to statutory children's services. Building capacity in early intervention and prevention systems not only better protects and supports children and families, it prevents needs escalating and recourse for social services intervention and adding pressure to children's statutory services.

Early intervention programmes such as Flying Start, and 0-12 services such as Children's Centres are making a tangible difference to lives of babies, children and families. Some of the barriers to accessing services, such as stigma and fear are reduced when services are seen to be supporting whole communities and are delivered by third sector organisations. The take up of support such as parenting programmes that increase parental confidence within these schemes is high. Flying Start for example reported 69% of parents accessing the service undertook parenting programmes between April 2020 – March 2021. (Welsh Government, 2021) The welcome extension of Flying Start support to include 2500 more children is positive yet there will still be families unable to access support due to restrictive eligibility criteria based on geographical location.

There is no holistic strategy for early intervention in Wales. Services like Flying Start need to be seen as part of a more holistic suite of preventative support for families with complex needs. Access to complimentary services that address parental issues such as mental health, domestic abuse,

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substance and addiction support, and financial skills also need to be routinely available to ensure that adverse childhood experiences are mitigated and parents are empowered and able to take more control of family situations.

## Priority 2

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### Edge of care & targeted family support services tailored for children and families at risk

For children and parents that could benefit from additional support to prevent family breakdown and problems escalating, evidence suggests that services such as Integrated Family Support Services, Family Group Conferencing and the Signs of Safety Model that take a whole family, strengths-based approach can be successful in reducing the number of children coming into care. However, provision and investment continues to be inconsistent with access often dependent on where a child and family lives.

Family Group Conferences, for example, which place the rights and needs of the child at the centre of the decision making process, has proved to be an effective intervention when offered, in particular, at pre-care proceedings stage; when a child is considered for a child protection plan or for reunification. The model has been subject to a plethora of robust evaluations highlighting that positive outcomes for children at risk of entering the care system are achieved, as solutions are co-produced and shared. Yet the programme is not available in every local authority in Wales, and where it is, is not routinely offered to families where a child is being considered for care.

A systemic Wales wide review of the impact of services to reduce children coming into care is essential. We are aware that this work has commenced and is being co-ordinated by What Works in Children's Social Care. Once this review is completed, ensuring professionals and organisations involved in preventative services are aware of best practice will assist services reduce unnecessary admissions to care and ensure limited public funds are well spent.

## Priority 3

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### Prevent and mitigate the impact of poverty: Child's right to an adequate standard of living

Levels of child poverty in Wales remain unacceptably high and are increasing, as the cost of living crisis is placing greater pressures on families, many of whom are struggling to provide the absolute basic essentials for their children. Living on a low income brings additional stresses and anxieties, and can lead to greater risks in some families experiencing fragmentation, separation or breakdown. There is a strong relationship between poverty/deprivation and child abuse/neglect and care admission, with research showing an over representation of children in most deprived areas on child protection registers.. As such focusing interventions on alleviating the impact of poverty are crucial.

No child should be at risk of being placed in care where poverty is a factor in the decision for that child to be removed. Yet data doesn't record this, and it is not clear how many children enter care where poverty is a contributing factor.

Progress to refresh the Welsh Government's Child Poverty Strategy should be accelerated, with actions to support children at risk and which help to maintain family security and stability prioritised.

Current research states that Social Workers feel powerless in the face of poverty (Community Care, 2020) but professionals in the social care sector, should be supported to recognise where they can intervene. Social work's aim is to promote social change and empower people and as such being aware of the impact of adverse childhood experiences, trauma and scarcity not only on the mental health of parent/carers but also on their relationship with money, food and resource is essential.

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High risk families who are subject to child protection or child in need services may be reticent in coming forward for support with money matters as they fear they may be viewed negatively, so may wait until crisis point. Financial social work or assisting families make changes in the way they manage limited budgets and can maximise budgets should be part of the offer to every family living in poverty but particularly important to those with complex needs. This would mean assisting people develop financial management skills in a trauma informed and sensitive way and being aware of and referring to services such as Citizens Advice, Credit Unions and Money Advice Wales when needed.

## **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**

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Professional Workforce, including children's services, corporate parents, carers and the critical role of children's third sector organisations

It is well documented that statutory children's services continue to experience significant capacity and budgetary pressures and have been described as being in crisis on many occasions. This has been a fairly persistent theme over the past decade.

Children and young people who are care experienced frequently raise the issue of a lack of a consistent social worker in their lives. For children living outside of their family for whom everything may have significantly changed, this key worker is seen by them as pivotal. Many children report having several social workers during their care journey. A young person stated recently: "I just want to tell people what has happened once, It's not very nice for me talking about things to someone new and I end up self-harming".

Not only does constant change prove disruptive for the child, it is also detrimental for the workforce in terms of impeding their ability to adequately carry out their statutory duties and functions, often leading to high turnover of staff, which is placing the current system under significant and unsustainable pressure.

Increasing the number of social workers and achieving stability of the workforce is essential if we are to provide children with the necessary confidence and assurances that the system is working to protect them. Ensuring the reduction of unnecessary bureaucracy, allowing social workers to assist families make meaningful change, capped caseloads and therapeutic supervision could all assist in staff retention.

Providing for and supporting care experienced children is not solely the responsibility of local authorities. All care experienced children should have an entitlement to a range of services and opportunities throughout their time in care, provided by a range of public bodies as part of their corporate parenting duties. We are pleased to see progress being made to publish a Corporate Parenting Charter, but robust statutory legislation will be required, with robust monitoring and accountability arrangements in place to ensure that duties are being met and delivering positive change for children.

Care experienced children should routinely have an active offer to independent advocacy support, including children with complex needs, disabled children and all children placed in residential settings. Whilst progress has been made through the National Approach to Statutory Advocacy framework, we are yet to be assured that all children who could benefit from an independent advocate can access support when they want to. We have called for there to be an independent

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review of the Active Offer arrangements and the National Approach to Statutory Advocacy more broadly to provide these assurances. Making better use of independent advocates to ensure the child's voice is heard in all decisions will be beneficial to social work teams and discussion between Independent Reviewing Officers and children. We would also wish to see all children having an entitlement to an Independent Visitor befriender scheme, which is underused and underinvested.

Children in care have experienced trauma not only due to conditions that led to them being in care but also the experience of being taken into care. Therapeutic support, including access to CAMHs when required, should be routinely available to this cohort as standard and not only offered when children are displaying challenging behaviour. 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. All children should be routinely assessed on entry into care and receive timely access to therapeutic support, and a repeat active offer of therapeutic support made available.

## Priority 2

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Placements – including closer to home where appropriate, ban unregistered accommodation and ensure the voice of the child in decision making

It is essential that all care experienced children are placed in suitable, high quality and appropriate placements, which provides a secure, stable and nurturing environment to enable them to thrive.

Placement moves due to poor planning, matching and breakdowns are hugely disruptive for children in respect of their health, education and their ability to establish and maintain lasting and positive relationships with family and friends. Children often find it unsettling and upsetting to be placed outside their local area, and can be more vulnerable, isolated and at greater risk.

A young person currently being supported by our Getting Ready Project stated:

“I wanted to stay in my school for GCSE's and 6th form so I got a bus over an hour every day. If I had moved schools as well I would never have ended up going to University”.

Care experienced children are not routinely involved in all decisions, including decisions of where they are to live, despite this being a fundamental right and entitlement. We welcome greater priority being given to ensuring that children are not placed away from their home area unless this in their best interest, yet currently there is a lack of choice and availability of local placements. In addition, there is a need for more specialist placements in Wales for children with complex needs.

We must listen to children and acknowledge their views on where they want to live. Frequently children will want to stay local but there are times when children may not want to. One of the young people we are currently working with stated:

“I was bullied for being poor in my old school, not just the kids but the teachers, I was glad not to go back”.

So for someone in their position a move was not a negative outcome.

No placement decision should be resource led. No child should be placed in an unregistered accommodation which are not subject to registration, or placed in unregulated accommodation where quality and standards can vary greatly. There is a lack of information or data on their usage nationally which should be urgently addressed.

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Recruitment and retention of skilled foster carers is an issue Wales wide which relies on recognition and support. As such ensuring this is achieved needs to be considered a core priority if we are to enhance choice and stability. There is also a need to value kinship care arrangements and provide parity of support, and make better use of families and friends, acknowledging that a significant number of children return home after a period in care.

In relation to current proposals to eliminate profit from care, whilst we support proposals to explore ways in which the current system can be rebalanced, we remain concerned that the current timeframes to deliver the proposals will be challenging, and should be revisited. Greater support should be in place to support, enable and incentivise third sector and other 'not for profit' providers to scale up existing provision.

### Priority 3

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#### Maintaining Healthy Relationships: Contact arrangements

Care-experienced children benefit from security and protection, and need strong, stable and consistent relationships with public bodies, past and present foster carers, family members and friends to nurture a better sense of identity and belonging. No child should be estranged from their siblings, unless it's in their best interest, and contact arrangements with siblings should be afforded the same importance as with birth parents. Fostering services should have a duty to promote personal relations and direct contact between the child and persons that the child has an ongoing relationship with.

We should enable all care-experienced children to maintain healthy relationships with those that most matter to them, supporting them to develop positive support networks as they approach care leaver age.

Children should also be better informed about decisions taken, and how their views have been taken into account. Maintaining relationships is frequently raised as an issues by young people we support.

"at my CLA review's I wanted to talk about seeing my mum and dad but everyone just avoided talking about it"

"I am in University and my brother and sister are still in care, I am not provided financial support to go home and see them now as I am an adult".

### 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

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#### Post care support: Financial, independent Living Skills and lifelong learning

Care-experienced children are exposed to processes of transition to adult life that are compressed, accelerated and challenging when compared to their peers, disproportionately likely to experience homelessness and a range of other poor outcomes. Young people leaving care have experienced multiple adverse childhood experiences and trauma which may not have been addressed or resolved during their time in care. As such a high level of support can be needed to help them achieve independence into adulthood.

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All young people should have access to financial education, advice and support alongside independent living skills. Many young people leave care unprepared in relation to having sufficient knowledge and understanding of financial matters. Some can be in significant amounts of debt or are living on Universal Credit. A detailed package of support set out in their Pathway Plan from 16 plus is always needed. The support provided needs to be trauma informed and bespoke to the needs of the individual young person.

It is not just a case of undertaking a budget with a young person, or hoping they engage in group. Assisting young people to prioritise spending on their basic needs and helping them to meet other needs in a healthier way is essential. This is one key element of our Getting Ready project. This can be achieved by

- Ensuring foster carers, When I am Ready providers and supported accommodation providers are trained effectively to teach these skills
- Where appropriate social services should make referrals to specialist third sector organisations to help meet this unmet need

We recognise the Basic Income Pilot as a valuable component in contributing towards ensuring that care leavers are not financially disadvantaged when they leave care and we would wish to see there being a long term commitment from the Welsh Government to ensure it becomes fully embedded. However, the initiative should be expanded to provide trauma-informed financial literacy, education and advice alongside the current financial package.

## Priority 2

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Housing options post 16 , including when I am ready arrangements and unregulated accommodation

The “When I am ready” scheme is an excellent opportunity for young people leaving care to have extended support and stability in a family environment. The feedback from young people about being able to stay put is largely positive.

A young person we are currently working with stated

“I don’t know how I would have coped at 18, I would have had to drop out of college, luckily (foster carer) said I could stay. It’s been 2 years now and I feel more ready”.

However, the scheme is not embedded across Wales and implementation appears to be at very different stages. The previous Welsh Government initiated this scheme and a great deal of publicity and capacity was made available to support its initial development. However, it no longer has the same degree of presence, with little attention now given in comparison. We believe this should be rectified and the scheme promoted and prioritised as a positive housing option.

For young people in other housing arrangements, the standard of accommodation and support received can vary greatly, with some young people in positive semi-independent living arrangements and others in B&B accommodation. We are concerned as to how suitable some of these placements, and unregulated housing options are for many vulnerable young people leaving care, some of whom will be at greater risk of exploitation, going missing or moving on to unsafe environments. 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 3

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## Post Care support – Personal advisors

When children and young people have suffered adverse childhood experience and trauma, they make take longer to be ready to transition to living independently, access further/higher education or be ready for adulthood and all the additional challenges that brings. The professional support to which they are entitled to is intended to be equivalent to that which a child who has not been looked after might reasonably expect from his or her parents. Many young people will require support beyond the age of 21 yet this is not consistently applied, which increased their vulnerability .

We support calls for all young people to have a right to a Personal Advisor up to the age of 25 and we call for this to be prioritised and action accelerated.

## Anything else

### Additional information for the 'In Care' section

Part of the role of foster carers and residential children's homes is to prepare young people for independence and many do an excellent job. Providing foster carers/care staff with training and support to undertake this complex work and available services/information as the young people they care for move to adulthood is essential. Our Getting Ready project has been supporting foster carers access information and be aware of local adult services. Without this preparatory work many children are very apprehensive about approaching adulthood and how they will thrive and survive.

Our project currently works with a number of 17 year olds with additional learning needs who do not meet the criteria for disability teams. The level of intervention needed to build skills in for example money management requires weekly sessions over an extended period which PA's and social workers do not have the capacity to undertake. When social workers and personal advisors only see young people every eight weeks is not conducive to this intense work.

"I don't know anything. I cant even make a cup of tea, I am not allowed in the kitchen as I make too much mess"

In relation to the system, young people frequently tell us that they either did not engage with or found their CLA reviews uninteresting. These meetings are the chance for young people to be heard and discuss their priorities yet one young person we work with said that she "sucked it up". These meetings should be child friendly and co-produced with children and young people, in a place the feel comfortable, with people that they want there. A young person is currently undertaking co-production training with Children in Wales and she advised that there needs to be

1. Less jargon. "What is an IRO?, you can tell me once and I will forget, tell me that if I am Harry Potter your my Gandalf, or things that I understand.
  2. In a comfortable place "Mine was in school and they would call me on a tannoy and I would have to explain to everyone why I was being called"
  3. With people I feel comfortable with "no one ever asked me who I wanted at my review. It was a teacher I didn't like who did the pre meeting questionnaire and attended the CLA review"
  4. Talk about young peoples priorities and hear their views "I sat their silent most of the time, I wanted to talk about my mum and dad and contact but they avoided that"
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