

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 Volunteering Matters | Evidence from Volunteering Matters

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

Priority 1

On announcing the winner, the judges said, “This inspiring initiative bridges generations to ensure that young people today learn from the experts from yesterdays”. – The Leaving Card Award, National Children and Young People’s Awards

“Becoming a Grandmentor has made me more patient, empathetic and increased my awareness of issues that young people are facing. I always aim to work together with my mentee to see the positive side of life and to put achievable steps in place to work through issues. Within this role I am always learning, and personally my mentee has helped me become more understanding and respectful of different cultural and religious beliefs. I took the decision to improve myself and get a qualification in counselling. I wanted to ensure that I could be a great mentor to my mentee, but it has also helped me to communicate and deal effectively with my children and colleagues at work” – xxxxx xxxxxx, Mentor on the Grandmentors programme for Care-Experienced Young People.

“I’m at college full-time building up my skills and language. I aspire to be an electrician and am doing some work-experience in this. I am vice-captain for the Volunteering Matters football team, ‘Valuable Migrants’ that includes anyone but especially refugees, asylum seekers and migrants. I am one of two people from xxxxxx xx xxxxxx and being a part of the football team, being with other young people and spending time at Volunteering Matters gives me a sense of community and home.” – xxxxxx xxxxxx, Mentee on Grandmentors

“Every young person should have a Grandmentor who can be a friend that listens, supports and encourage” – Mentee on the Grandmentors

Our aim and ambition: for every care-experienced young people to have a friend that listens, supports and encourages.

At Volunteering Matters we have over 60 years of experience of bringing people together to overcome some of society’s most complex issues through the power of volunteering.

The Grandmentors Programme is an intergenerational mentoring programme for care experience young people. This group of young people are amongst the strongest and most resilient in any community. Through the skill of mentoring, care experienced young people are supported to be

autonomous, capable, and empowered adults. Established in 2009, Grandmentors now runs in 12 locations across England and Scotland. A mentor is typically aged 50 years or over and a mentee is a young person typically aged 16-24. This programme recruits older volunteers who use their life experience and skills to provide emotional and practical support to young people transitioning from the care system to independent living.

Priority 1: Dedicate resource, time, and effort to transforming the culture of local authority procurement by prioritising:

- The happiness of the young person: Understanding their social, emotional, mental health and educational needs. A person-centred approach is vital.
- Promote utilisation of volunteers and volunteering as an active/effective preventative, non-clinical intervention: young people need people to be present, aware and supported in a way which isn't fragmented, into typical funding and sectoral silo.
- Increasing the level of trust commissioners, professionals and care-experienced young people: volunteers have independence to build trust/greater understanding between people, and can help strengthen advocacy and capture learnings.
- Mobilisation: Mandating the meaningful involvement of multiple voluntary orgs. and community organisations within the coordination of support for care-experienced young people will ensure grassroots responsiveness and intelligence.
- Community capacity/resilience: Allocate investment in in hyperlocal community and social fabric.
- Invest in the convening, facilitation, and the creation of connections.

Priority 2

Invest in the training, professionalisation and development of public service and community professionals, particularly in relation to the experience of care-experienced young people or people at risk of entering the care system: we all are a duty to improve the outcomes and experiences of care-experienced young people.

In relation to this priority these points are worth emphasising:

- Reform for care-experienced young people is not just something to include and reflect in corporate guardianship strategies but is area an area of work, and a priority that ought to systematically underpin in all areas of public service and civil society – a golden thread.
- Invest in the education around the importance of trauma-releasing practices for professionals and volunteers that engage with (and work alongside) people at risk of entering the care system.
- Invest in the education around the importance of trauma-releasing practices for professionals and volunteers that engage with (and work alongside) people at risk of entering the care system.
- Interconnected to the education of trauma-releasing practices, the prioritisation (and investment in) time, trust and relational working is key: once trained, Grandmentors work together

with a care experienced young person at their own pace to forge trusting and positive relationships that support, challenge, and empower young people to unlock their own skills and to shape their own futures.

- A holistic, cross-sectoral approach and methodology is required. With the help of their Grandmentor, our care experienced young people work through goals and/ or concerns, usually around the areas of employment, education and training, housing and finance and health and wellbeing. Grandmentors are encouraged to schedule regular contact with their young person and to plan some fun activities that will offer them new opportunities and broaden their horizons. Further evidence for transformational impact of Grandmentors: of the 175 actively matched young people in between -01/01/2022 and 01/10/2022:

- 63% were independent or stable in terms of their wellbeing, this has increased from 35% when asked at the beginning of their mentoring experience.
- 82% were independent or stable in having suitable living standards, this has increased from 73% when asked at the beginning of their mentoring experience.
- 41% were in concern or crisis in sustaining education, employment, and training, this has decreased from 50% when asked at the beginning of their mentoring experience.

Case studies:

"My mentor helped me to improve my English, she brought me educational books and set me English homework. She gave me advice about life in the UK and always encourages me to never give up and think positive. She's a very kind person. She helped me with my immigration status and pushed for a decision to be made when it was delayed and effecting my mental health" 2022 Grandmentors Mentee

xxxxx xxx xxxxxx xxx xxxxx were matched in December 2019; xxxxxx was referred as he had become lonely and isolated after his dad passed away and struggled to leave the

house. Since working with his mentor xxxxx has

- Secured a part-time job
- Felt less lonely, by having someone to talk to
- Had help with food shopping; something he was previously struggling with
- Had someone to take him to appointments
- Gained the confidence to go out and about on his own
- Gained a mother figure and mentor in Kathryn.

Priority 3

Promote the idea in principle, policy and practice that the aim of children's service and adult social service are essentially the same: to enable the flourishing, fulfilment and long-term prosperity of citizens in society that require support.

Recognise that Grandmentors is only many, varied and effective placed-based programmes that Volunteering Matters run. Another to highlight here is Family Mentors: by preventing and de-escalating issues, our volunteers help struggling families to turn things around. volunteers, recruited from the local community, come from diverse backgrounds and receive extensive training. They act as trusted mentors, providing consistent emotional and practical support to families in their homes every week for six months. Volunteers tailor their support to the unique needs of each family, building on strengths and promoting resilience.

Support is overseen by our professional volunteer managers, who are embedded within the local authority's children's services team. This ensures that interventions are seamlessly coordinated and flexible, adding value to professionally delivered services. We provide the vital practical and emotional support to create brighter futures. The projects recruit, train and match volunteers to mentor and support families with complex needs, such as alcohol or substance misuse, mental health and emotional wellbeing and where children are at risk of significant harm through neglect. Volunteers make weekly visits to the families building up a strong relationship with the parent/s, listening to their problems and offering practical help.

Run in partnership with Council Social Service teams to target families most in need of support, our volunteers help keep families together and reduce the number of children on child protection plans and child in need plans. By improving parenting skills, reducing isolation and improving the quality of family life the reliance on social care services is also reduced.

They act as trusted mentors, providing consistent emotional and practical support to families in their homes every week for six months. Volunteers tailor their support to the unique needs of each family, building on strengths and promoting resilience.

Family Mentors is similar to Grandmentors in principle, purpose and its value-driven, person-centred and place-based approach. However, instead of our volunteers being matched with a individual young person, they are matched with a family – supporting the parents and their wider networks to overcome their obstacles and challenges. Our wider points are these:

- Despite the fact that they sometimes interact with different departments within local authorities, Grandmentors and Family Mentors are both preventative, non-clinical interventions with the same goals.
- Our framework for Family Mentors is similar to Grandmentors too (i.e. focussing on (1) housing and finance [living standards, financial support etc.], (2) education and schooling [improved schooling and behaviours, parental support to education, identifying further opportunities etc.] and (3) health and wellbeing [improved mental health, self-care, ability to make healthy choices etc] as outcomes.
- Each area is scored between 1-6, 1 being good and settled, 6 requiring the most immediate and urgent attention. Every family matched will be initially scored with information gathered from the referral, care plan, early observation, meeting with the family and their description of need. The scoring is closely monitored against the contact visit reports supplied by the volunteer. Family Mentors staff carefully study the feedback the changes that are happening, periodically reviewing the starting scores, and concluding scores at the end of our support.

Case study: "Rita has helped in so many ways, she always has come up with really helpful ideas, she always encourages me, helps me see the difficulties but will boost me and show me I can make it. B-Family APL

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

Priority 1: Developing and strengthening holistic community-based support networks through volunteering

We believe that supporting children, young people and families involved in the care system should be a whole community endeavour and that everyone will benefit from a more holistic, connected, engaged approach.

In looking for new ideas, we therefore urge you not to look for stand-alone 'interventions' but holistic and sustained approaches that support care experienced young people to develop long term connections and relationships in communities.

We see through our volunteer mentoring programmes, Grandmentors and Volunteers Supporting Families, the power of developing community connections and relationships, which often develop into lifelong connections and frequently spark further community action and involvement for both mentees and mentors. These have positive impacts for the whole community and should be an integral part of the levelling up agenda.

Grandmentor projects run in 12 (soon to be 13) local areas and the impact of this can be far reaching, including improving access to training and employment opportunities, housing advice, mental health and wellbeing support, building confidence and resilience, as well as developing lifelong friendships. Volunteers Supporting Families programmes are active in Greenwich, Southend-on-Sea and Waltham Forest, and is proven to reduce the number of children at risk of going into care.

The Grandmentors programme provides a true place-based approach by recognising that the challenges young people face is different in each location the programme is run and therefore each location tailors its support to their community needs. Our Grandmentors and care experienced young people often become more active in their own local community, which fosters relationships between individuals and promotes awareness of the Grandmentors programme to wider audiences.

Local authorities should work with local community groups and other partners to consider how voluntary mentoring schemes, such as Grandmentors and Volunteers Supporting Families, can be supported, sustained and become an integral part of community support across the country.

Supporting care experienced young people through mentoring schemes such as Grandmentors has wide reaching positive impacts on mentees, mentors and the wider community.

For young people leaving care to flourish, they need to feel connected in a place and able to build connections across the community. Volunteer mentoring projects open up opportunities and connections in communities to enable young people to develop this important sense of connection and place.

Positive impacts include higher proportions of young people in education or training (82% of Grandmentor mentees, compared to 60% nationally), support with housing and finance issues and links made to wellbeing and mental health services where appropriate.

However, the power of this approach and positive community impact often goes beyond the mentor-mentee relationship. For example, care experienced mentees in Islington are involved in many community projects, including sewing hospital gowns at the start of the pandemic, packing, and delivering parcels to isolated people and working in a soup kitchen for homeless people. They also transformed a community garden from a neglected weed covered space into a vibrant garden, a haven for wildlife. When schools opened after lockdown, the young people also distributed school uniforms and school supplies.

Priority 2

Priority 2: For local authorities to support organisations that are committed to place-based approaches and community capacity building.

In relation to this priority, bear these points in mind:

- What is relevant should be valued over what is recent. Funders must be encouraged to take a longitudinal approach to funding (i.e. commit/ringfence funding to organisations over 3-5 year periods minimum). Trust, partnerships, and local knowledge about organisations/individuals takes a long time to foster. Knowledge of people and places is gained over time and organisations which demonstrate continuity and consistency deserve the legitimacy that is shown through long-term funding.
- Recognise the effort it takes for organisations to embed/sustain positive impacts. Sustained, incremental progress over 10 years will be more impactful and cost effective than larger impacts over a short period of time.
- Funding methodologies, not pre-designed outcomes: Volunteering Matters' work through programmes such as Grandmentors and Family Mentors demonstrates that the right service models can be replicated across communities. Our work has also demonstrated that funding and coordination at scale is beneficial.
- Streamline funding to enable organisations to prioritise the delivery of services. Organisations like Volunteering Matters are able to use operational economies of scale, but fragmented funding structures and processes can cause delays to people receiving the services they require, which in turn can perpetuate distrust and apathy amongst care experienced young people, people with SEND and their wider connections that we have an obligation to help.
- Encourage the use of further spot contracting, off-framework provision.

Priority 3

Priority 3: Design a collaborative, values-driven framework to guide care reform in Wales, which is akin to The Promise in Scotland or The Vision for Volunteering in England.

We need to inspire radical reform. We need to demonstrate where we are wanting to achieve, how, why and by when. We need to demonstrate that we are willing to do this together and that ideation, leads to action and implementation, and that we all have a duty to make a meaningful contribution towards the greater whole.

Look at The Vision for Volunteering in England as a template for change: a ten-year strategy for volunteering in England. When describing the intentions of the vision “ambitious movement” come to mind: ahead of its launch in May, more than 350 people from more than 300 organisations contributed, with their thoughts, reflections and ideas being shaped, amplified and endorsed by NAVCA, NCVO, Volunteering Matters, the Association of Volunteer Managers and Sport England. From the start, the Vision has been a wonderful thing to be involved with and it remains so, because it is motivated by what and how we want volunteering to be represented and embedded in a decade – rather than now. There are 6 principles that guide the vision, which apposite for any public sector reform:

1. Awareness and appreciation - a culture of volunteering is further ingrained in the collective psyche, part of everyone’s life, from childhood to later life, and woven into the activities and pastimes of day-to-day living.
2. Power: Where volunteering is understood as the community taking action, often enabled or supported by organisations, but not always driven or generated by them.
3. Equity and Inclusion: We want volunteering to be accessible and welcoming to everyone, everywhere, so that the benefits of volunteering - to individuals and communities - are equally distributed.
4. Collaboration: There should be a radical shift in emphasis towards building community-led coalitions of interest and collaborative activity, rather than creating top-down and imposed partnership working.
5. Experimentation: We need to see the volunteering landscape as dynamic, not static. We need to ask ourselves: What opinions and structures are we holding onto too tightly? What could be done differently? We need to accept that change happens, and welcome it - without insisting on forcing it to happen for the sake of it. How can we better share insight, advice and learning? How can we embrace and spread the benefits of emerging technology?

The Promise: Scotland has known for a long time that its "care system" isn't working. It's not done as much as it could to make sure care experienced children grow up loved, safe and respected, and that's made things harder for those children. Sometimes, things have remained hard as they've moved into adult life.

And because Scotland’s “care system” isn’t working, it comes at a real cost:

- It comes at a human cost, because of the impact it has on the people in and around it.
- It comes at a financial cost, because the money isn’t spent in a way that really supports people.

In 2020, Scotland made the promise.

A lot of work's gone in to understanding what needs to change so that Scotland's promise can be kept.

For over three years, the Independent Care Review listened to care experienced children, young people and families. It heard about how many of them did not feel loved, were not kept safe and were not respected.

Listening to their experiences of the "care system" helped make it clear what needed to change.

And it helped identify where gaps in Scotland's knowledge existed.

Their input allowed the Independent Care Review to produce:

- a series of detailed reports which outlined a vision for how Scotland should care, and
- an evidence framework which set out in detail the research backing the promise, and which addressed the gaps care experienced people identified.

The promise is based on the experiences of real people.

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

Priority 1: make being care-experienced a protected characteristic in equality and anti-discrimination law: remove the burden of proof currently upon care-experienced young-people.

England's Independent Review of Children's Social Care recommended care experience be a protected characteristic following lobbying by people with experience of the system.

Five ambitious missions are needed so that care experienced people secure: loving relationships; quality education; a decent home; fulfilling work and good health as the foundations for a good life. Central government and local authorities, employers, the NHS, schools, colleges, and universities must step up to secure these foundations for all care experienced people. This will require a wider range of organisations to act as corporate parents for looked after children, and the UK should be the first country in the world to recognise the care experience as a protected characteristic.

It is paramount that care-experienced young people have a powerful voice in the decisions that affect them: their life is led by them and supported by the people that they choose and trust. Care-experienced young people currently have a plethora of different professionals in their lives, but too few adults who are unequivocally on their side and able to amplify their voice. This system should be simplified by replacing a number of existing roles with truly independent advocacy for them that is opt-out, rather than opt-in. And the support, money, and resource ought to follow them after the point at which they move into independent living. End the cliff-edge in support that currently exists; whilst a care-experienced person may in theory have a diagnosis of a medical condition, they will, in practice, likely to be living with trauma, anxiety, institutional distrust, a lack of trusting and supportive relationship (which is why the mentorship that Grandmentors provides is so vital).

Priority 2

Priority 2: To indicate the importance of self-directed support and decision making, follow the model of Direct Payments and/or Personal Health Budget to ensure that every young person upon leaving the care system has access to financial means via a Government backed (and national rolled-out) scheme.

For ease of explanation: direct payments allow people who receive social care services to receive cash payments from your local authority instead of care services. This can give you much more flexibility and greater control of their support package. Unfortunately, this kind of provision is not available to most care-experienced young people because a formal medical diagnosis is required before being able to access support of this nature.

Priority 3

Priority 3: Similar to “the two tick” system in recruitment (where when (1) somebody declares that they have a disability and (2) that it is proven they meet all of the criteria for a job, employers are mandated to shortlist them for interview), ensure that care-experienced people, when they are applying for paid or voluntary roles, have access to an advocate or union representative to support them in the recruitment process.

People who are care-experienced are significantly more likely to not be in education, training, or employment, which is why a supportive measure like this (Grandmentors or Family Mentors) is required across Wales.

Anything else

At Volunteering Matters we have an incredible amount of evidence demonstrating the transformational power of our intergenerational mentoring programmes upon care-experienced young people and struggling families. Both Grandmentors and Family Mentors are established programmes across England and Scotland, and have been recognised externally (with awards and certifications) for their positive impacts upon people, institutions and places. We will share any further information on our work without hesitation upon request. xxxxxxxx xxxxxxxx xxxxxxxx xxxxxxxx xxxxxxxx xxxxxxxx xxxxxxxx xxxxxxxx

We look forward to engaging in and supporting this consultation further. Many thanks.