

CYPM21 Barnardo's Cymru

Senedd Cymru | Welsh Parliament

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

Plant a phobl ifanc sydd ar yr ymylon | Children and Young People on the margins

Ymateb gan Barnardo's Cymru | Evidence from Barnardo's Cymru

Please set out any views on missing children below.

You may wish to consider:

- **Nature and scale of the issue and regional variations.**
- **At risk groups: including the impact of care experience and out of area placements.**
- **Practice: issues such as information sharing and data collection.**
- **Policy: the effectiveness of devolved policy and practice responses, including Welsh Government oversight. Whether there is effective read across to relevant Welsh Government strategies.**
- **Devolved and UK powers: how joined up is the interface between devolved and non-devolved policy such as criminal and youth justice.**

Nature and scale

We feel that the number of children and young people who go missing is significantly under-reported, with certain groups of children more likely to be reported as missing, whilst others are more likely to slip through the cracks.

We have discussed groups of young people that we consider to be at risk below.

At risk groups

At risk groups include:

- Care-experienced young people
- Young people with mental health conditions
- Young people who have been moved out of area, particularly in the first few weeks after the move

Practice

Return home interviews

We argue that it is best practice to offer multiple contacts to a child that has returned home after a period of time missing. This allows the opportunity to build a relationship with a child, ensure that the worker's phone number is saved in a child's phone so that they have contact details for a trusted adult should they go missing again, and to give them the opportunity to spend some time with the worker before going through the potentially difficult process of dealing with the issues brought up by a RHI. For some young people, it could be weeks before they are ready to talk through their time missing.

We support calls for Return Home Interviews to be made statutory in Wales, if a number of questions and concerns would be addressed as part of this. We would have questions and priorities around how to ensure that this is effective and meaningful. A statutory response is not in and of itself a solution and would have to be part of a much wider package of reforms and investment.

For a RHI to be made statutory and to be delivered in a way that we believe is truly child-centered and trauma-informed, there would need to be significant investment in workers so that children have access to the same person on a number of occasions, if this is assessed as needed. The RHI should be a process, not a single event. It should also act as a protective factor in the event of future missing episodes so that the young person would have access to a consistent, safe and trusted adult.

Furthermore, the critical analysis and safeguarding decisions that are a part of the RHI process – whereby a worker should be considering the risks of exploitation, abuse and other risks that have led up to the missing episode or emerged from the missing episode and might need action – is a significant skill set that requires investment in training and supervision for a worker. A worker needs to be able to put together various pieces of information and partial or full disclosures from a young person to determine greater risks and action needed. For RHIs to be statutory, there would again need to be significant investment to ensure that all workers are equipped with the skills to support a young person.

In the absence of significant investment and training for the workforce, we would need to see more clarity on how a statutory RHI would be any different from a current statutory requirement for a police Prevention Interview which has more emphasis on sighting the child and their wellbeing.

The priority for Return Home Interviews is for investment, training and support for staff, and for an embedded approach that is trauma-informed, relationship-based, child-centered and, importantly, independent. If the means to achieving this is by creating a statutory requirement, then we would support this. However, we would need more clarity and detail about what the statutory measure would look like. Key questions would include would every missing child be entitled to one? What would

the timeframe be? What would the statutory framework look like and how would investment and training sit alongside this?

Social care workforce

As with all areas of the social care workforce at this time, there are endemic issues around recruitment and retention of staff which makes it incredibly difficult to ensure that children always have access to the same worker and can build a trusting relationship

Welsh Government should invest in ensuring that social work across the board is an attractive career option with a focus on retaining experienced and trusted staff. The sector is in crisis, with high caseloads, long waiting lists and low morale. We must tackle this entrenched issue to improve outcomes – both in terms of staff themselves and the way that we can support children, young people and families.

Information sharing

There continue to be issues around being able to get information about children from partner agencies, this is particularly the case when a child is new to a local authority; gathering relevant information in a timely fashion is incredibly important but can be time-consuming and slow.

Policy

The All-Wales Protocol on reducing the criminalisation of care-experienced young people is thought to be improving practice across Wales. Practitioners note that former common place practices such as, when a missing child was identified by police, a care-experienced young person would often be taken to the police station and potentially even a holding cell, whereas a non-care-experienced young person would be taken home under the same circumstances, have begun to change. There is also more proportionality in terms of police contact with care-experienced young people, so the protocol is achieving positive changes overall. But practitioners felt that there was still further to go as the protocol beds in.

Practitioners noted the challenges that come with rapid changes to policing in Wales. Police officers might spend relatively short periods within certain teams, and it was felt by practitioners that as soon as officers had developed a level of expertise and understanding of the issues facing children and young people, they would then be moved on to a new team. There should be more work undertaken by police to boost institutional knowledge and training for officers. Previous successful training programmes include the Early Action Together programme.

Devolved and UK powers

Whilst practitioners feel that they have effective relationships across various agencies, there are still tensions. Agencies governed by UK Government often have different guidance to those under Welsh Government, and so apply different

approaches to children and young people. This can include the extent to which efforts are made to ensure that children and young people are not unfairly and unnecessarily criminalised. Good practice on this front is still emerging, but there are issues that still persist.

Practitioners also shared examples of issues between police forces when a child went missing from one local authority and was identified as being in another one, at risk of criminal exploitation. There was disagreement and communication backwards and forwards about which police force should be responsible for finding the child and making them safe. Practitioners felt that this decision-making was based on managing limited resources rather than making a child-centered decision. Whilst this is understandable in the face of cuts to public services, it does not focus on outcomes for children and young people at risk.

Please set out any views on children and young people who are victims of criminal exploitation below.

You may wish to consider:

- **Nature and scale across Wales and regional variations (e.g. traditional, drug related, sexual, financial).**
- **At risk groups: including care experience, children experiencing trauma in the home and children not enrolled in mainstream education.**
- **Policy: The effectiveness of devolved policy including Welsh Government oversight. Whether there effective read across to relevant WG strategies such as Child Sexual Exploitation.**
- **Practice: Approaches to prevention, community resilience, early intervention, support provided and exit strategies for victims. Practice issues such as information sharing and data collection.**
- **Devolved and UK powers: How joined up is the interface between devolved and non-devolved policy such as criminal and youth justice? Are there any points of tension between criminal law and safeguarding?**

Practitioners felt that traditional ideas of exploitation have changed over time. Previously, boys were associated with being victims of child criminal exploitation and girls were associated with being victims of child sexual exploitation. This pattern has changed, particularly with regards to seeing boys becoming victims of child sexual exploitation. However, practice has not necessarily always kept pace with this change. For example, most social workers and intervention workers are women, which demonstrates practical barriers to working effectively with boys.

It is our concern that whilst there are several different forms of exploitation which require different responses and support for children and young people, increasingly, exploitation is treated as one, homogenous issue. This comes at a detriment to the children and young people who need a response which understands the trauma that they have experienced. Failing to understand and offer appropriate responses to children and young people puts recovery at severe risk and leaves children and young people traumatised and unsupported.

When we identify one form of exploitation or abuse, there should be a level of professional curiosity to see whether there is more abuse being perpetrated that we need to safeguard children from. This requires a level of training and skills which means that workers supporting young people can spot the signs and search for more to understand a child's experiences and risk factors.

We are seeing a rise in exploitation which is facilitated online, creating greater risks for children and young people, even at times that we might believe they are physically safe inside the home. It is our experience that policy making struggles to keep up with the rise of online crime and exploitation.

Policy

Practitioners noted that they feel that services are effective and successful at supporting children and young people at risk of exploitation when they are able to intervene at an early stage in response to issues such as periods of missing, anti-social behaviour, referrals on the periphery, for example. They feel that they have a track record of working with partners to educate children and young people, support parents to make their children safe and carry out safety planning. But when cases have escalated further, they find it difficult to take steps to de-escalate and ensure that children are safe.

Practitioners indicated a wish to undertake reflective work on how de-escalation can be effectively managed in more risky, complex cases.

Practice

Early intervention and prevention

We have several concerns around early intervention and prevention. Firstly, it is becoming increasingly difficult to carry out meaningful prevention work.

Budget cuts mean that local authorities struggle to invest in non-statutory services which children, young people and families would rely on in the prevention space.

We are concerned that the Wales Police Schools Programme is coming to an end in 2024, following cuts in Welsh Government's 2024/2025 budget. This programme is vital for helping children understand the role of the police, getting to know local officers and building relationships, and undertaking early intervention and prevention work.

Whilst we were pleased to see reinvestment in the Social Care Workforce Grant and Children and Communities Grant in Welsh Government's 24/25 budget, there is still a cut to the CCG alongside local authorities increasingly struggling to use their core funding for early intervention and prevention work. This early support which wraps around the family and the child is invaluable in identifying issues and risks early on and preventing escalation.

When it comes to secondary intervention and preventing issues from escalating, children and young people are waiting too long for support. There seems to be a lack of understanding that where a child is at risk of exploitation, situations can escalate quickly, and a child

could move from being at risk of abuse or exploitation to being abused within a matter of days. Within that context, the waiting lists that we see children sitting on are unacceptable. The nature of the intervention that is offered to young people can also often be inappropriate; we see children in need of a specialist response only being offered very early intervention support which is not appropriate for their needs and does not properly mitigate the risk that they are facing.

There is also disparity across local authorities; some local authorities have been able to invest in services that support children, young people and families and we have seen good practice in areas such as Swansea and Neath Port Talbot. However, in other areas, practice is described as 'hotchpotch' by practitioners.

Multi-agency working

Practitioners felt that there are good examples of multi-agency working, but that this is not consistently the case. Practitioners noted that it is sometimes difficult for police officers to develop trusting relationships with young people, when officers often spend a short period within a team.

Practitioners also felt that better ways of working could be developed between children's services and sexual and mental health services. They reported barriers such as having to take a child to sexual health services but having to wait for a long time to access contraception and medication, or mental health services that could not respond to the needs of children and young people who had been victims of exploitation.

An example of how much of this has been done effectively can be found in the Bristol Exploitation Partnership. The Bristol Exploitation Partnership encompasses true multi-agency working to support children and young people who have experienced criminal or sexual exploitation. There are several agencies who work together with Barnardo's practitioners including, social services, the police service and health professionals to provide multi-agency support to children and young people.

The partnership has developed interventions that work with children, young people, their families and communities to build both interventions and prevention-based solutions to the risk faced by young people. For example, Barnardo's workers alongside the police adult sex worker officers take part in outreach activities to gather intelligence and proactively understand the risk factors for young people.

There is both a CAHMS nurse and a sexual health nurse embedded into the Barnardo's building. For some young people there is a reluctance to attend a CAHMS appointment off-site but through working with their trusted adult (support worker) they may feel supported enough to do so. The sexual health provision provided by the specialist nurse on site can hold appointments with young people, alleviating the issue of having to ask them to visit another service and deal with waiting times and other unknowns. Embedding these services means there is a heightened response to young people's needs, and this has been successful in supporting young people with sexual health and preventing pregnancy.

One young person shared:

"I would get in her car, get under a blanket and sleep while we drove out of the city. And she just let me sleep as long as I needed. When I woke up she'd buy me some food, and when I was ready, we would talk. I always liked that I didn't have to talk about things, it was just if I was ready. If I didn't feel like talking it was OK, I could just have a sleep and some food."

Female, 18

Building the right solutions for young people is based on both their needs and their strengths, supporting them to feel aspirational through activities as interventions, building their knowledge and safe spaces. It has also been vital that families and communities are engaged.

Devolved and UK powers

Similar issues exist as those that are raised in our answer on missing children.

Please set out any views on other groups of children on the margins.

You may wish to identify other groups of children "on the margins". These would be groups of children in circumstances that require a specific response from children's services or other statutory providers and for which there are concerns about the current policy or practice.

Children and young people who are not attending school

In many cases, there is not enough understanding of children who are not currently attending school. Numbers have not rebounded to pre-pandemic levels, but the

understanding and support for children and their families where a child is not regularly attending schools is not yet meeting the need.

Children and young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness

Homelessness is a significant factor in aggravating the risks facing young people. There should be joined up support for young people who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness, to safeguard them and provide them with safe accommodation. There should also be increased efforts to identify those young people at risk of homelessness.

Care-experienced young people turning 18

There continues to be a concerning drop-off in terms of the support available to a care-experienced young person as they reach the age of 18. Whilst Welsh Government has sought to introduce guidance to change this, the reality is that for many young people their support system will look very different overnight when they reach their 18th birthday.

For young people with other vulnerabilities or who were already at risk, this exacerbates things significantly. There are fewer people engaged with young people on a regular basis, a young person's living situation may have changed, and their life may look very different, very quickly.

Maintaining strong relationships and networks at this age is crucial, which is why Barnardo's has urged Welsh Government to adopt Lifelong Links for care-experienced young people across Wales. Lifelong Links is a process of identifying a care-experienced young person's support network in the run up to them turning 18, to help provide stability and ongoing support as they navigate changes to their lives. This can lead to the development of other protective factors such as building self-esteem, cementing the role of trusted adults in a young person's life and much more. In Newport, a 12-month trial of the Lifelong Links programme found that on average, a young person would start the process with planned contact with four family members, and by the end of the intervention this had increased to an average of 12.

Siblings of children who have gone missing or been victims of exploitation

There needs to be better prevention and support for children who are siblings of those who have previously been missing or victims of exploitation.

We know that siblings often grow up in the same homes, exposed to the same ACEs and trauma as their siblings who have previously been missing or victims of exploitation and abuse. Therefore, we miss an opportunity when we don't undertake targeted prevention work with siblings. There has previously been good work undertaken in the third sector to support siblings, but this is becoming more difficult to do with budget cuts affecting all areas of services. In our practitioner's experiences, they often find that after supporting a young person, they might then find that a sibling is referred for support 12 months later. This illustrates that we have

an opportunity to develop good practice and develop relationships with young people before they become further at risk.