



Mr David Rees MS
Chair,
Committee for the Scrutiny of the First Minister
Welsh Parliament
Cardiff Bay,
Cardiff,
CF99 1SN

6 June 2024

Dear Chair,

Committee for the Scrutiny of the First Minister

I am writing in response to your letter of 9 May following the recent scrutiny session on care-experienced children and young people. I was very pleased to have the discussion with the Committee on this very important area and especially with care-experienced children and young people able to witness first-hand this discussion.

The attached annex A provides responses to the Committee's questions outlined in your letter. The responses will show that through the current Transformation Programme for Children's Services substantial progress has already been made. I do acknowledge this is a journey and this is the beginning, and we will constantly review and update our work to ensure we address the concerns identified by young people whilst also aligning to our Children and Young People's Plan. You will know that the various elements of work ongoing are at different degrees of maturity, and I am confident that they will deliver better outcomes for children, young people and their families.

I look forward to our discussion on 12 July.

Yours sincerely,

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

Additional information on care experienced children

The rise in the numbers of children in care

What additional steps your government intends to take to safely reduce the number of children going into care, given existing investment and approaches have not yet reversed the increase.

I am firmly committed like my predecessor to deliver on our ambition to transform social services for children, young people, and their families across Wales doing all we can to help support families continue to successfully care for their own children. I and all Welsh Ministers share the passion to make the radical change that is so obviously needed.

I acknowledge that the numbers of children in care have remained static. You will appreciate the last few years have seen difficult and challenging times for Children's Services post covid. We have had to scrutinise and prioritise how best we spend our money given the financial situation we face given the cost-of-living crisis in the UK. This has also resulted in both financial and workforce challenges for local authorities.

We are working to tackling these challenges through the current Transformation Programme for Children's Services. The Programme has made substantial progress, but we are on a journey and know that change will not happen overnight. The following are just some of the steps being taken that I believe will safely reduce the numbers of children going into care.

Continuing our work to ensure the lived experience of care experienced children and young people is at the heart of everything that we have done and continue to do. We will continue to work closely with Voices from Care on the Care Leavers Summits. These Summits have provided an opportunity for Ministers to hear directly from care-experienced children and young people their experiences and their thoughts on what changes need to be made.

We are progressing work to deliver the commitments set out in the Care Experience Summit declaration, the first of its kind in the UK. The Minister for Social Care and I are committed to achieving the vision outlined by the young ambassadors.

Our Transformation Delivery Group has been established for over a year and is chaired by Jonathan Griffiths who is our Transformation lead for both adult and children's social services. The Group within its membership includes care-experienced young people representation. The Group is taking forward two workstreams – one focused on data and metrics and the second looking at early help and prevention which align to themes from the Children, Young People and Education Committee report "If not now, then when".

Aligning to early help and prevention, parental advocacy supports parents to positively engage with social workers, third sector organisations, the family courts and other professionals to resolve issues that are negatively impacting their family. We are investing £1.6 million of funding during this Senedd term through the Care Experienced Children Change Fund to scale up existing Parental Advocacy projects on a regional basis and to ensure new services are established in each of the seven regions in Wales as part of a national roll-out.

Work is firmly underway to develop and deliver a National Practice Framework. The Framework will be the first set of national standards for children's services in Wales, sitting alongside other all-Wales procedures like the All-Wales safeguarding procedures. We undertook engagement on the first 6 standards earlier this year and following consideration

of the feedback received, we are now developing a full draft of the Framework for continued engagement and aim for a full Framework, for implementation, to be published by the end of the year.

We are progressing our commitment to eliminate profit from care and have introduced legislation to deliver on this. Eliminate is much more than models of ownership and profit, it is about building resilience in the sector, best meeting the care and support needs of our young people, keeping them within their communities and doing all we can to support them to be with their families.

We launched the Corporate Parenting Charter in September last year. To date 40 organisations have signed up including Welsh Government and Welsh Ministers. We continue to encourage all public bodies as well as private bodies and the third sector across Wales to sign up and become Corporate Parents.

Between 2021 and 2023, a total of £3.5m of Regional Accommodation funding was used by 15 projects across all regions in Wales. This resulted in the creation of 26 new beds of regional provision for children with complex needs and support was provided to 62 children and young people with complex needs. Since then, we have allocated over £23m in this area and continue to receive proposals through the Housing with Care Fund. This will deliver a further 96 beds in total, of these 5 homes are already operating with 15 beds. Complementing this approach, the Health and Social Care Regional Integration Fund (the RIF) includes a significant investment of circa £18m per annum in supporting families to stay together safely and therapeutic support for care experienced children.

We have continued to heavily invest in our national fostering scheme, Foster Wales, to improve the ability of local authority fostering services to recruit and retain foster carers.

We are committed to ensuring that kinship foster carers receive the same support as mainstream foster carers and through the Foster Wales National Commitment we are working towards an agreed package of training, support, and financial assistance being consistently available to all kinship foster carers through all 22 local authority fostering agencies in Wales.

This is a journey, this is the beginning, and we will be constantly reviewing and updating our work to ensure we address the concerns identified by young people while aligning to the Children and Young People's Plan. Various elements of work are at different degrees of maturity, and I am confident that they will deliver better outcomes for children, young people and their families.

The Welsh Government's role as the corporate parent and grandparent

The timescale for strengthening the Welsh Government's Code of Practice for looked after and accommodated children as it refers to corporate parenting. We would also welcome information on any additional steps the Welsh Government can take to support Kinship Carers in recognition of the important role they play.

We will be developing a draft of the dedicated chapter on Corporate Parenting within the Part 6 Code of Practice, this year. The chapter will set out more clearly duties for corporate parents and support a strengthened strategic approach to corporate parenting. We will be engaging with all stakeholders in the development of the chapter and will be sharing the draft with care experienced children and young people to get their input. The chapter will form part of a wider update of the Part 6 Code of Practice which will come into effect before the end of the Senedd Term.

Welsh Government values the role that kinship care offers. Providing the opportunity for a child to live with a family member or close friend, when their parents are unable to look after them, will make a huge difference to the life of a child.

As part of our work to radically reform children's services in Wales, Welsh Government has set up a Special Guardianship Expert Group which will develop an improved and consistent needs-based approach to supporting Special Guardianship families across Wales. This group has representation from the statutory and third sector alongside service users and as part of its work it will look at ways of capturing the views of children and young people. The intention is to widen the scope of this group in due course to look at the use of and support available for kinship foster carers in Wales.

In addition, Foster Wales is committed to ensuring that kinship foster carers receive the same support as mainstream foster carers and has launched its national commitment which is an agreed package of training, support, and rewards consistently available to all foster carers (mainstream and kinship) in Wales through all 22 local authority fostering agencies in Wales.

Foster Wales is also committed to ensuring that kinship foster carers receive the same financial support as mainstream foster carers. One of the aims of our current work on fees and allowances is to ensure consistency, alongside other elements of the financial support to all approved foster carers. Currently all approved foster carers across Wales (including mainstream and kinship foster carers) are paid at least the national minimum allowance to meet the needs of children in their care. In addition, all local authorities pay an enhanced allowance/fee to mainstream foster carers.

Through Foster Wales and the harmonisation of fees and allowances work, we are seeking to ensure that the availability of an enhanced allowance/fee is available to all approved foster carers (including both mainstream and kinship foster carers) providing they are assessed to meet the eligibility criteria as set out in the enhanced allowance eligibility policy.

The current legal framework, under the Fostering Panels (Establishment and Function) (Wales) Regulations 2018, necessitates kinship foster carers reaching the same standard of suitability to foster as mainstream carers. The only difference for kinship foster carers is that they are approved to be a foster carer for a particular child under these regulations. Welsh Government is aware that many practitioners, panels and decision makers have struggled with the fitness for purpose of the current regulatory framework for kinship foster care.

To aid the fostering sector, Welsh Government is currently undertaking a scoping exercise to consider legislative changes that could be introduced to enable an alternative and more 'fit for purpose' way forward for the assessment of kinship carers.

Homelessness

An update on how the next iteration of the Welsh Government's White Paper on ending homelessness in Wales will address the needs of care experienced children, including care experienced birth parents. You will be aware that Welsh Government data shows that 315 care leavers were homeless in Wales in 2022-23, a significant rise since 2020-21. As you will also be aware, these figures refer to young people up to the age of 25 being actively supported by their local authority as care leavers at the time their homelessness was reported. We note that both the Welsh Government's Expert Group Review has made a specific recommendation and the Children, Young People and Education Committee has said that a "sixth category entitled to 'reasonable preference' should be created for people

who are care experienced regardless of homelessness status, in order to avoid them entering the homeless system to access social housing". Can you confirm this will be taken forward?

The Welsh Government published our White Paper on ending homelessness at the end of last year and we recently published our [analysis of responses](#) received to that consultation. The proposals within the White Paper are rooted within corporate parenting responsibilities and hold huge potential to transform the experience of young people and particularly care leavers, experiencing or at risk of homelessness. We are not able to set out the content of any future legislation at this stage, but we are committed to ensuring the needs of care leavers are prioritised in that work and will continue to engage with stakeholders to deliver this aim.

Delivering the outcomes of strategies to support care experienced children

What steps your Government intends to take to strengthen the mechanisms to *deliver* existing strategies affecting care experienced children. For example the national target in the 2016 strategy, Raising the ambitions and educational attainment of children who are looked after was to raise the attainment of looked after 15 year-olds at Key Stage 4 of the Level 2 inclusive threshold from 17% in 2014 to 25% in 2016. Latest published figures from 2019 show the percentage remained at 17% at that time.

Our ambitions for education in Wales are set out in *Our national mission: high standards and aspirations for all*. They include a commitment to equity of outcome in education for every child and young person in Wales.

We remain committed to improving educational outcomes for care experienced children, whilst recognising the importance of looking holistically at their needs in school. We also want a focus on progress along the child's own learning pathway and for them to build positive relationships with adults and their peers. The Cabinet Secretary for Education is considering the points made by the young people at the third Care Experienced Summit in March. They very eloquently gave their ideas on how the education system could be improved for care experienced learners.

Care experienced children are at higher risk of poor mental health, so this must be addressed as a platform for them to achieve the best possible outcomes. Welsh Government has provided significant funding through the looked after element of the Pupil Development Grant (PDG) to support this objective. This is underpinned by the whole-school approach to mental health and wellbeing, which continues to be a key priority for the Welsh Government.

Our commitment to care experienced young people's education is matched by a range of support in schools and for post 16 education. The PDG includes £5.7m funding in 2023-24 to specifically support care experienced children in school. The funding aims to improve educational outcomes by reducing the barriers they often face to achieving their full potential.

We have provided £1.2m to local authorities over the last three years to implement a pilot Virtual Schools Model (VSM) to improve educational outcomes for care-experienced children. We are evaluating the pilot and expect the final report to be published by March 2025. The findings will influence future policy development and strategic direction on support for the education of care experienced children.

The VSM pilot complements other provision in local authorities which support the education of care-experienced children. These include the Virtual School Head and Looked After Children Education Coordinator roles; Personal Education Plans; additional academic support and strong pastoral systems tailored to the needs of care experienced children. Every college in Wales has a student services team to provide wellbeing, practical and financial support to help learners fulfil their potential post 16. The Welsh Government also provides a range of financial support to enable care experienced learners to continue their studies in Further Education Institutions.

Children's social care workforce

What additional steps your Government will take to ensure there is a children's social care workforce that's fit for purpose and your expectations of the role of local authorities and Social Care Wales in this regard. You will be aware that in 2022 there were 639 vacancies in children's social work teams across Wales and that in September 2023, 17.5% of children's services social workers were employed by an agency.

We are acutely aware that the social care workforce faces recruitment and retention challenges, and the Welsh Government, Social Care Wales (SCW), social care organisations, and employers are working together to address these issues. A holistic approach is necessary to ensure sufficient staff with the right skills to meet the needs of adults, children, and young people. The government and SCW collaborate with local authorities to address workforce needs and ensure sufficient training opportunities.

The Social Care Workforce Development Programme through SCW supports local authorities with their 'grow your own' initiatives. This provides opportunities for employees to study social work whilst employed. The number of "grow your own" students continue to rise (6% higher in 2022-23 with updated figures for 23-24 expected in June). Welsh Government has invested £10 million in the social worker bursary to make the social work degree financially attainable for those on a HEI study route. Initial data on the social worker bursary shows a 50% higher uptake from postgraduates in 2023-24, and a 13% growth overall in both undergraduate and postgraduate numbers. However, we must be mindful that social work training can take between 3- 6 years to complete. We maintain our support for employers interested in recruiting international social workers ethically and sustainably. Well over 100 international social workers applied to register with SCW last year, and this upward trend is continuing.

Children and young people frequently tell us that they experience frequent changes in social workers. The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) is currently leading work focusing on terms and conditions for social workers, including looking at the national approaches for example digital solutions and caseloads. We know that caseloads are a key pressure on social workers, however they are a symptom of wider workforce pressures and cannot be looked at in isolation. This piece of work will aim to support and attract individuals into the profession, but also to also reduce movement of qualified staff between local authorities due to variations in terms and conditions.

The Association of Directors in Social Services (ADSS) are leading on the "All-Wales Pledge – Stabilising Children's Recruitment Agencies" where they brought local authorities together to develop a Memorandum of Co-operation for Wales. The pledge looks at setting consistent agency pay rates across Wales, and a set of principles local authorities will adapt in engaging their agency workforce. ADSS information shows a reduction in the use of agency workers within Local Authority services between 1 July 2023 and 1 January 2024, (from 320 in October 2023 to 280 in January 2024). Positively, there was also an increase in

agency staff transitioning into permanent roles (27 agency workers in the same timeframe). This work continues to gain further traction.

SCW has embedded “WeCare Wales” the first national profile-raising campaign for careers in social care, early years, childcare and play, into all aspects of its work to help attract, recruit and retain workers into the sector. It has developed targeted schemes for professions experiencing staff shortages and those finding it hard to recruit, including social work.

The well-being of the sector is a priority and should underpin all our policies. We recently extended the free mental health support offer (Canopi) to the social care workforce which was originally for health only. Canopi have reported an increase in take up of social care staff and we are exploring how we can further support Canopi to deliver the full offer to the social care workforce. We will also continue to fund the delivery of the BASW Peer Support Service (PSS), which offers social workers a free peer to peer support, allowing them to manage work related issues, and to develop their career by getting advice and support from more experienced, fellow social workers.