



Children and Young People on the margins

Evidence to the Children, Young
People and Education
Committee

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1. Introduction

This paper uses the term ‘children and young people who are reported missing from home or care’. The term ‘going missing’ can infer that children and young people are making a choice and infers responsibility for the ‘problem’ onto those children and young people.

The available evidence base identifies that any child or young person who is reported missing from home or care could be at risk of being exploited or experiencing other harms.

This paper provides an overview of safeguarding concerns from current data collection and research including children and young people who are at higher risk of being reported missing, being exploited, or at risk of exploitation.

This paper explains current policy and practice in Wales that relate to these safeguarding concerns including how agencies respond when concerns are raised.

Due to the importance of safeguarding children and young people and the breadth of the safeguarding agenda, responsibility sits across more than one Ministerial portfolio.

2. What we know about the nature and scale of these safeguarding issues

Data collection by the Police about missing persons

The UK Missing Persons Unit (UKMPU), within the National Crime Agency, collects and analyses data about missing persons (children and adults), in support of investigative and preventive operations by police forces within the United Kingdom.

The **most recent Written Report (2021/22)**¹ states that in relation to England and Wales, the total number of individual children who went missing was 63,866 and that 'children in care made up 24% of all children (individuals) who go missing, but account for 43% of all incidents involving missing children'. This means that 'on average, a child in care who went missing in 2021/22 would have done so on 5 occasions, compared to 2 occasions for a child not in care who went missing.'

In comparison to England, in the same period, Wales recorded 10,204 incidents, 3,249 of which relate to (individual) children and young people.

Of this figure 1,138 of these children and young people were in care at the time of being reported missing.

*This average number of missing occasions cannot be calculated as North Wales Police did not provide data for this period)

*Children and young people may have more than one incident of being reported missing so the information on individuals is more helpful.

Data collection by local authorities on children who are reported missing in Wales

The **Social Services Performance and Improvement Framework** developed by Welsh Government in partnership with local authorities, has been able to collate and publish the total number of reports (incidents) and the total number of children (individuals) who go missing from care during the year, by local authority area. The All-Wales 2022/23 figures are as follows:²

	Total number of reports of children who go missing from care	Total number of children who go missing from care
2020-21	2,977	1,139
2021-22	3,744	1,422
2022-23	5,391	2,097

¹ 2021-22 UKMPU Written Report <https://missingpersons.police.uk/en-gb/resources/downloads/download/128>

² StatsWales – children who go missing from care during the year, by local authority <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Health-and-Social-Care/Social-Services/social-services-performance-and-improvement-framework/children-and-families/childrens-safeguarding/childrenwhogomissingfromcareduringtheyear-local-authority>

From 2023-24, the **Children Receiving Care and Support (CRCS) census**³ will also measure the number of times children and young people go missing during the collection year, exploring characteristics such as age, gender and ethnicity, which will provide additional context around who is being reported missing, and any patterns and trends that indicate vulnerabilities that we associate with groups that may be at higher risk.

Local authorities (under the Social Services Performance and Improvement Framework) and the CRCS census collect data on missing children who are looked after and/or receiving care and support, or support as carers from the local authority. Additional metrics captured by the CRCS census, include all children with a care and support plan who are:

- supported in their families or independently.
- looked after and in the care of or accommodated by a local authority.
- on the child protection register and are subjects of an inter-agency protection plan.

Notifications to Care Inspectorate Wales about children who are reported missing from care and those at risk of sexual or criminal exploitation

Regulation 60 and Schedule 3 of the Regulated Services (Service Providers and Responsible Individuals) (Wales) Regulations 2017⁴ require **providers of care home services for children** (children's homes) to notify Care Inspectorate Wales, the placing authority and their own local authority **when a child goes missing or has an unexplained absence**.

This includes, but is not limited to, where a child's location or reason for their absence is unknown and there is cause for concern for them because of their vulnerability or risk to self or others. The point at which the care home is concerned and will take action, including reporting the child missing to the police, will vary according to the child's individual risk assessment.

Providers must also notify Care Inspectorate Wales, the placing authority, their own local authority and the police of **any incident of child sexual exploitation (CSE) or child criminal exploitation (CCE), or where this is suspected**. This includes but is not limited to:

- where a child identified as at risk of CSE or CCE goes missing;
- where a child reports an incident that indicates they may be a victim of CSE or CCE; or
- where there is reason to believe a child may be subject to CSE or CCE.

³ Wales Children Receiving Care and Support Census <https://www.gov.wales/wales-children-receiving-care-and-support-census>

⁴ The Regulated Services (Service Providers and Responsible Individuals) (Wales) Regulations 2017 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/wsi/2017/1264/contents>

Data recorded by Care Inspectorate Wales on Regulation 60 notifications received for 2022/23 and 2023/24 are set out as follows:

Number of notifications from providers of care home services for children (1 April to 31 March each year).

Notification category	2022/23	2023/24
Missing or unexplained absence of a child at the service	1,950	2,629
Incident or suspected incident of child sexual or criminal exploitation	89	82

Regulation 40 and Schedule 3 of the Regulated Fostering Services (Services Providers and Responsible Individuals) (Wales) Regulations 2019⁵ also requires **providers of fostering services** to notify Care Inspectorate Wales, the placing authority, their own local authority and the police of **any incident of child sexual (CSE) or criminal exploitation (CCE), or where this is suspected**. This includes but is not limited to where a child reports an incident that indicates they may be a victim of CSE or CCE, or where there is reason to believe a child may be subject to child exploitation.

Criminal exploitation of children and young people

Within the UK Government's National Referral Mechanism (NRM) framework, criminal exploitation is identified as one of four forms of modern slavery. This is alongside sexual exploitation, labour exploitation and domestic servitude.

The main legislation on criminal exploitation is the Modern Slavery Act 2015. The UK Government has committed through the 2024 King's Speech to "*strengthening the law to tackle those who exploit children for criminal purposes*"⁶.

People of all ages and backgrounds can become victims of criminal exploitation. Criminal exploitation of people under the age of 18 is designated as Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) and defined by the UK Government as follows:

"Child Criminal Exploitation is common in county lines and occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18. The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual. Child

⁵ The Regulated Fostering Services (Service Providers and Responsible Individuals) (Wales) Regulations 2019 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/wsi/2019/169/contents>

⁶ Prime Minister's Office, The King's Speech 2024 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6697f5c10808eaf43b50d18e/The_King_s_Speech_2024_background_briefing_notes.pdf p. 57.

Criminal Exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.”⁷

Home Office guidance describes CCE as including forced labour, forced theft, benefit fraud, acquisitive crime, drug cultivation and production, and ‘county lines’ cases.

Statistics published by the Home Office show the following number of referrals of potential child victims of modern slavery sent to police forces in Wales for investigation during 2023⁸:

Exploitation type	Male	Female	Other	Total
Criminal	214	13	0	227
Labour	23	1	0	24
Labour & criminal	11	1	0	12
Not specified or unknown	17	10	0	27
Sexual	5	36	1	42
Sexual & criminal	4	9	0	13
Sexual & labour	1	1	0	2
Sexual & Domestic Servitude	0	1	0	1

The UKMPU data is considered to be the most consistent data available as it uses the police definition of what constitutes a ‘missing’ episode. The national definition of a ‘Missing Person’ is ‘anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established and where the circumstances are out of character, or the context suggests the person may be subject of crime or risk of harm to themselves or another’.

Local authorities can view their data collection more frequently than the UKMPU data would be available, and this would support prompter responses in strategy and practice. The data collation of children who are looked after who are reported

⁷ Home Office, Modern Slavery: Statutory Guidance for England and Wales (under s49 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015) and Non-Statutory Guidance for Scotland and Northern Ireland https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6659a22316cf36f4d63ebcc3/Modern+Slavery+Statutory+Guidance+_EW_+and+Non-Statutory+Guidance+_SNI_+v3.10.pdf, p. 79.

⁸ Home Office, Modern Slavery: National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify statistics UK, end of year summary 2023: data tables <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65e1d2fd2f2b3b001c7cd847/modern-slavery-national-referral-mechanism-and-duty-to-notify-statistics-uk-end-of-year-summary-2023.ods>

missing enables local authorities to tailor their response to this high-risk group. The Census will enable local authorities to map wider trends and patterns amongst all children and young people who have an active care and support plan. Though their legal status may differ these are also children and young people who have potentially experienced abuse and/or neglect and/or trauma in their lives.

Data collected by Care Inspectorate Wales supports the identification of any patterns and trends relating to specific registered settings. This supports a prompter response to any concerns there may be about practice in a particular setting so that work can be done to support the setting to ensure their practices are keeping children safe.

3. Policy and Practice

It is widely recognised that the reasons children and young people are reported missing are “varied, complex and unique to individual children”⁹. For example:

- reacting to an event or change in their lives such as a change in family circumstances or a bereavement.
- problems at home (family home or home where they have been placed)
- may be unhappy about decisions/may not feel listened to.
- may go missing to areas where they have family or connections.
- may be experiencing neglect or abuse at home. They may also be encouraged or coerced to go missing by dangerous adults or by other children.

Groups identified as at increased risk.

There are some children whose circumstances mean they are at higher risk of going missing or being exploited. For example:

- looked after children are three times more likely to go missing than other children.
- children and young people in care who are placed outside their local area are at particular risk of going missing.
- unaccompanied asylum-seeking children could be at higher risk of exploitation.

(UKMPU data for England and Wales 2021/2022)

Transformation Programme for Children’s Social Services

The Welsh Government’s vision for children’s services is for more children to be supported to remain with their families with fewer children and young people entering care. We want the time that young people stay in care to be as short as possible, consistent with meeting the needs of the young person. We know that children who are placed outside of their local area are at greater risk of going missing. A key part of our vision is about ensuring that children who are in care can remain close to home so they can continue to be part of their community and support networks.

Understanding the lived experience of children and young people in care and how this impacts their lives is at the heart of everything that we have done and continue to do. That is why we have worked closely with Voices from Care Cymru to organise a series of Care Leavers Summits. These Summits have provided an

⁹ <https://www.safeguarding.wales/en/chi-i/chi-i-c6/c6-p9/>

opportunity for Ministers to hear directly from children and young people about their experiences and their thoughts on what changes need to be made. We are working hard to deliver the commitments set out in the Care Experience Summit declaration, the first of its kind in the UK.

Corporate Parenting

Our Corporate Parenting Charter publicly which launched in September 2023 is a good example of how we are working with a range of partners to support and improve outcomes for care experienced children and young people to have those life chances they deserve. The Charter is about taking a children's rights-based approach.

The Charter, which again has been developed with care experienced young people and partners, aims to drive consistency of approach across public bodies in Wales, improve engagement and raise standards of expectations of all who act as a corporate parent to the children and young people who are looked after and care leavers.

A communication and engagement programme is ongoing to encourage all organisations involved in the lives of care-experienced young people to sign up to the Charter and embrace its aims of supporting the welfare of all care-experienced young people.

Eliminating Profit from the care of children looked after

The Welsh Government has also committed to eliminate private profit from the care of children who are looked after. Eliminating profit from care is about values and needs based provision, it is about fundamentally changing how services are provided to children and their families as part of a network of local, community-based services that safeguard and promote the welfare of the young person.

The changes we are seeking to make will ensure that public money invested in care home services for children and fostering services does not profit corporate entities, but instead is spent on children's services, to deliver better experiences and outcomes for young people; support service development and improvement; and further build professional development for those providing care.

They will enable local authorities to plan and secure appropriate care placements more effectively with children and young people more likely to be placed in environments that match their needs more closely. This will support the overall well-being and development of looked after children, leading to better social, educational, and health outcomes.

Placement stability for children and young people is critical and helps optimise an environment where they have the best chance to recover, develop, flourish and progress. There is a need to develop and expand the selection of high-quality placement options which best meet the wide ranging and complex needs of children to help ensure the right placement for each child is made at the start of their journey.

A more efficiently managed market will support this and reduce the need to place children far from their communities. By improving placement planning and capacity management, local authorities can make more placements available closer to the children's original communities thereby ensuring continuity and greater stability of placements.

National Practice Framework

Work is also firmly underway to develop and deliver a National Practice Framework. We want the Framework to be the key foundation for how we work in Wales to ensure the best outcomes for our most vulnerable children, helping us achieve greater commonality and more seamless working at local, regional and national level, and provide families with the support they need as we transition to fitting services around people, not people around services.

Support for Children in Care

Part 10 of the Social Services Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014 imposes duties on local authorities in respect of statutory advocacy. All looked after children must be made aware of their entitlement to independent advocacy support and how they can access it. This entitlement is not just for when a looked after child or care leaver wishes to complain but includes situations where children or young people need to make representations about the quality of the care and support provided by the local authority.

Under Part 6 of the Act, a local authority must also consider whether it would be appropriate to appoint an independent visitor for a child they are looking after, taking into consideration factors such as whether the child is placed at a distance from home or out of the local authority area, whether the child experiences difficulties communicating or building positive relationships or whether they are likely to engage in behaviour which may put the child at risk of forming inappropriate relationships

Additionally, children and young people who are looked after will have review meetings at least twice each year that are chaired by an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) who will have had contact with the child or young person in between review meetings. The role of the IRO is to ensure the child/young person's rights are upheld, that their wishes and feelings are listened to and that agencies supporting the child/young person deliver support to meet their individual needs as set out in their care and support plan.

Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking children/Refugees

Welsh Government continues to take a 'child first, migrant second' approach to supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and refugees and we expect Welsh partners to take the same approach. Local authorities are required by the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 to act in the best interests of and have due regard to the rights of the children they serve.

As part of the Programme for Government, Welsh Ministers are committed to continue to support and uphold the rights of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people during this Senedd term. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children were represented at the series of inaugural care experienced summits ensuring their voices are heard as part of the transformation of children's services.

UASCs in Wales are also supported through the Welsh Government-funded Asylum Rights Programme (ARP), which includes funding for TGP Cymru's Young Asylum Seekers and Refugees Programme. This is a partnership of organisations across Wales providing expert advice and support to people seeking asylum as they navigate the UK asylum system.

Welsh Government recognises that arriving alone within a foreign country can have a devastating and lasting impact on the lives of children and young people. It is vitally important that unaccompanied children who arrive in Wales are given access to the care and support they need to help them adjust to their new life here.

In Wales, we have an Independent Child Trafficking Guardianship (ICTG) service operating nationally across England and Wales since 2017 which supports trafficked children, however recently, we have seen a significant rise in the numbers of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and there is therefore a greater need to look at whether a UASC Guardianship service is required specifically for Wales.

Moving forward we are committed to looking at the current support available for unaccompanied children and young people, and to exploring how a guardianship service could work in Wales, the resources needed to implement such a system and how it could complement the statutory services that are already available for UASC in Wales.

Child Sexual Abuse including Child Sexual Exploitation

The Delivery Report for the first National Action Plan for Preventing and Responding to Child Sexual Abuse was published in November 2022. With a wide range of public and third sector partners we are now leading development of a second plan which will build on the tools and resources for families and practitioners created under the first plan.

Key actions are being matured to support the 3-year Delivery Plan. Each action will be designed to support Wales to achieve the overarching goals set out in partnership with our stakeholders. These will be directly informed by the recommendations of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) published in October 2023.

There are four strands to the Delivery Plan: prevention, protection, supporting children and young people (and their families), and supporting adult survivors.

We aim to publish the new Delivery Plan and National Strategy in 2025, alongside implementation and monitoring plans.

Modern Slavery – Child Criminal Exploitation ('modern slavery by any other name')

As modern slavery is a reserved matter, the Welsh Government engages regularly with the UK Government on tackling exploitation and supporting survivors. The Welsh Government is a member of the Modern Slavery Engagement Forums organised by the Home Office. Welsh Government officials meet regularly with Home Office officials on various policy issues relating to modern slavery, including through quarterly meetings between the Home Office and the Devolved Governments.

The Wales Safeguarding Procedures detail the essential roles and responsibilities for practitioners to ensure that they safeguard children and adults who are at risk of abuse and neglect. The Wales Safeguarding Procedures are supported by the All Wales Practice Guides. This includes the Practice Guide on safeguarding children from Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE).¹⁰ The Practice Guide recognises links to various intersecting safeguarding issues and risks. Other Practice Guides include safeguarding children who may be trafficked, safeguarding children from Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE), and safeguarding children who go missing from home or care.

Resources in Wales on CCE include the Complex Safeguarding Wales Practitioner Toolkit. This was developed by researchers at the Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre (CASCADE) at Cardiff University as part of a Health Care Research Wales-funded study into CCE in Wales.¹¹

The Independent Child Trafficking Guardianship service has operated nationally in Wales since 2017 under a Home Office contract. The service is delivered by Barnardo's National Counter Trafficking Centre. The service provides both direct and indirect support to trafficked children, including children and young people who have been criminally exploited.

The Welsh Government organises the Anti-Slavery Wales Forum to bring together multi-agency partners to tackle modern slavery and support people with lived experience of exploitation. The Forum is supported by four thematic working groups. These are: prevention; support for survivors; training and awareness raising; and supply chains.

All Wales Safeguarding Procedures

In Wales we have a central website for our safeguarding procedures for both children and young people and adults at risk.

¹⁰ Social Care Wales, Safeguarding children from Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) <<https://safeguarding.wales/en/chi-i/chi-i-c6/c6-p1/>>

¹¹ Cardiff University, Complex Safeguarding Wales <<https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/complex-safeguarding-wales>>

The procedures clearly set out what action must be taken by all agencies, (particularly children's services and police) in response to the identification of a child either experiencing abuse and/or neglect or at risk of being abused/neglected.

If a child/young person is identified as experiencing exploitation (criminal or sexual) children's services will arrange a strategy meeting with police and other agencies involved with the child and their family to consider what steps need to be taken to safeguard the child who has been reported and any other children who may be experiencing/at risk of abuse and/or neglect.

The procedures include a range of All Wales Practice Guides (to be read in conjunction with the procedures) relating to specific topics such as criminal exploitation which include sign posting to other resources that may assist practitioners from all agencies to identify and report concerns that will lead to earlier intervention in children's lives.

4. Conclusion

Welsh Government responsibility for safeguarding children and young people who are reported missing from care or home, at risk of, or being exploited either criminally or sexually, sits across several branches and two Ministerial portfolios.

Welsh Government commissioned research to assist in future policy formation about children and young people who are reported missing:

- A review of policy, procedures, and practice in responding to children who go missing from home or care.
- Stakeholder engagement with children, young people and their carers during Return Home Interviews.

Findings from the research reports have identified several key areas that need where further development is required, though it is acknowledged by the researchers that there are some limitations to this evidence base and wider consultation is required.

- Welsh Government is **establishing an internal policy advisory group** that will include representatives from policy areas that have a vested interest in this area to consider what we can do better or differently at a policy level.
- Welsh Government has **established a stakeholder group** to consider how we explore the issues raised in the research more widely with all key stakeholders. The inaugural meeting will be held before the end of September.
- The stakeholder group will also **consider the role of related Pan Wales/regional groups** that currently exist to share best practice.
- The stakeholder group will consider what is already known about **the provision of Return Home Interviews** and how these projects are funded currently.
- The stakeholder group will review examples of best practice in Wales.
- Using the evidence base gathered via consultation, the stakeholder group will **review and revise the All Wales Practice Guidance: Safeguarding Children who go Missing from Home or Care**.
- The stakeholder group will assist in **developing a targeted plan** which will be presented to the Minister for Social Care regarding any further actions. The estimated timescale for this will be **May 2025**.

There is considerable work ongoing in Wales to safeguard children and young people. However, it is acknowledged there is more work to be done.