

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 Cymdeithas Cyfarwyddwyr Gwasanaethau Cymdeithasol | Evidence from Association of Directors of Social Services (ADSS)



Background

The Association of Directors of Social Services (ADSS) Cymru is the professional and strategic leadership organisation for social services in Wales and is composed of statutory directors of social services, the All Wales Heads of Children's Service (AWHOCs), the All Wales Adult Service Heads (AWASH) and tier three managers who support them in delivering statutory responsibilities: a group which consists of over 300 social services leaders across the 22 local authorities in Wales.

The role of ADSS Cymru is to represent the collective, authoritative voice of senior social care leaders who support vulnerable adults and children, their families, and communities, on a range of national and regional issues in relation to social care policy, practice, and resourcing. It is the only national body that articulates the view of those professionals who lead our social care services.

As a member-led organisation, ADSS Cymru is committed to using the wealth of its members' experience and expertise. We work in partnership with a wide range of partners and stakeholders to influence the important strategic decisions around the development of health, social care, and public service delivery. Ultimately, our aim is to benefit the people our services support and the people who work within those services.

General Comment

ADSS Cymru welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry initiated by the Senedd's Children, Young People and Education Committee into services for care experienced children: exploring radical reform.

To accompany this written evidence, we have produced a short video to highlight and contextualise the excellent professional practice that local authority Children's Services are delivering every single day to support children, young people and their families. The video is only intended for the purposes of evidencing the work of social services to the Committee and to protect the individuals involved, is not for sharing or public consumption.

As a leadership organisation based within the Welsh local government sector, we want to work with Welsh Government and other key partners to ensure there are high-quality, consistent, person-centred services delivered right across Wales, that support children, young people and their families to stay together in their communities.

We would expect any service or model of support to be designed around core principles that:

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- reflect individual voices and lived experience
- intervene early
- build on family's strengths and are also responsive to parents' needs
- are outcome focused
- improve well-being and reduce risk
- are attuned to unique personal circumstances and settings
- are integrated with other services, reducing the number of professionals individual children and families need to get to know and trust

The Context

Achieving an impact on the child's outcomes that is both positive and enduring requires their needs to be prioritised by all agencies while they are looked after and, in some circumstances, afterwards. For some children this will be regardless of whether they return home, remain looked after or are placed permanently elsewhere through adoption, special guardianship or residence.ⁱ

We welcome Welsh Government's commitment to Children Looked After and Care Leavers in its Programme for Governmentⁱⁱ, published in 2021 and look forward to every opportunity to be involved in leading the changes that will transform services. Aligned systemic change across systems is an essential basis to reforms.

Heads of Children's Services across Wales are leading services transformation that is achieving great outcomes, some of which is included in the video evidence. Committee Members are invited to visit any of those initiatives to witness that work and meet the young people and families. In particular, services have focused upon looking for new and better ways of safely keeping families together and avoiding the looked after system where possible or improving well-being outcomes for care experienced young people whilst continuing to manage the many meanwhile risks associated with our current operating environment.

In the video, for example, we include a case study of one local authority's transformative Family Network Project, which began as a pilot in 2020. The case follows the story of a mother of two children, one of whom has complex physical and mental disabilities. Social services had to intervene when the mother began experiencing Complex PTSD and anxiety during the Covid-19 Pandemic and was struggling to provide a safe home environment for her children.

The individual interviewed in the video was invited to take part in the new project, which uses the 'family finding model' to help families develop their natural networks. The project team facilitated in-depth conversations with the parent, her children and her family and friends,

which helped her to share her experiences and struggles at her own pace and allowed her to take control of developing her own support system. At the end of the process, the mother and her children had experienced a deep transformation: she had built confidence, and a support system of people who understood her struggles and were able to provide clear lines of support and connection for her and her children. The parent was able to provide a safe, stable home for her family, which meant that social services no longer needed to be involved.

To put this evidence into context, at the end of March 2022:

- Over 7000 childrenⁱⁱⁱ in Wales were looked after away from their home, mostly living with:
 - Extended family members (Kinship care arrangements) or friends (16%)
 - Foster carers (69%)
 - Residential child care (including residential schooling) (8%)
 - Adopters (3%)^{iv}
 - Independently (with support) (2%)
- 650 children previously looked-after returned to family or special guardian (other than previous foster carers); 285 had an adoption order granted and 145 moved to independent living.^v
- 380 young people left the care system due to either reaching the age of 18, moving to independent living settings, transitioning to adult services or living with a foster carer in a When I'm Ready arrangement.^{vi}
- As of the end of March 2021, there were over 17,000 children receiving care and support from local authorities in Wales – of this figure 2,275 were aged 16 years and over. Of the total figure, 9,815 were not looked after.^{vii}

There are approximately 3,800 foster families in Wales - 71% are foster carers with their local authority.^{viii} Around 2700 foster carers, as well as family and friends carers, are part of Foster Wales.^{ix} The reasons why children become looked after are many and complex.^x Children who are looked after will have experienced forms of loss, abuse and neglect prior to entering the care system and these experiences will often stay with them for the entire lives. Ensuring that care experienced children and young people can achieve their full potential and lead happy childhoods and then transition to experience enriched adult lives, requires resources and care from all agencies beyond that provided routinely to their peers.^{xi}



The Workforce – the video provides insights into what our people can deliver. We asked Family Support Workers in Swansea and RCT what the best and most challenging parts of their roles are. Their passion and dedication in helping the families and young people they work with is clear, despite the extreme pressures of their roles. The video also displays several moving examples of social workers who have drawn on their creativity to initiate innovative projects that make an immeasurable long-term impact on children and young people’s lives.

We hear from the residential care home manager who founded ‘Budding Minds’, for example, which has provided routes into further education and career paths for young people who struggle in mainstream education by setting up opportunities to learn horticultural skills such as growing vegetables in a polytunnel. Social workers talk about wanting to provide the same level of support and opportunities for the young people in their care as they would their own children. The young people who speak in the video express deep gratitude for the care and dedication shown to them by their social workers, which has allowed them to achieve their educational goals.

Our workforce is our greatest asset in the context of transforming service and the potential is significant. There is much in Wales to build upon. However, for now, many local authorities are putting out fires linked to vacancy rates, increased demand with increased caseloads and budget cuts^{xii}, and if these remain unresolved there is the potential to eclipse reform. We believe the scope for radical reform in this area is a concerted national effort, by all parts of the system, to allow us to staff services effectively whilst growing skills, knowledge, confidence, and trust. This requires change of us all at many levels.

Making voices and experiences count – radical reform involves establishing trusted and objective systems that means that voices are heard. The Children’s Commissioning Consortium Cymru co-produces children’s services across Wales with the 22 local authorities, over 60 service providers, and crucially, with children looked after through their Young Commissioners Programme. In the video clip about the Consortium, one young person interviewed talks about how, ‘it helps young people in care to express their feelings and views, and... know what other people in care are going through.’ Rather than children looked after feeling like they are ‘the only one’, as one foster parent comments, the Consortium ensures there is meaningful, regular connection, which supports the collective voice of children and young people looked after to be heard and have an impact on service provision. There are other examples of excellent engagement and co-production across Wales including through the Adopted Children and Young people’s Youth Councils.

We support the Welsh Government’s endeavour to consider a range of perspectives to be able to form an objective, and representational view of current experiences and would welcome the opportunity to explore how this is achieved. Wales greatest strength is the

potential that can be delivered by coordinated, solution focused work with stakeholders, and accountability that is closer to people with experiences of services. For example, we welcome the development of the good-practice Charter for Supporting Parents In and Leaving Care.^{xiii}

Early Help Systems – Our early help systems are the first line in supporting vulnerable families but are yet to be supported by stable and sufficient funding. One local authority’s Family Network Project, which features in the video and was referred to earlier, proves the efficacy of early help systems. The person-centred approach taken by the team, supporting families to feel heard and be in control of developing their own systems of support within their communities, prevents children from becoming accommodated. What is needed is a coordinated national effort to build trust and diminish the stigma of individuals and families asking for help. We need to promote self-help systems and, wherever possible, offer service choice that focus on family strengths, not weaknesses. The scope for radical reform here is:

- a. sustainable funding that reflects the scale of the demand in Wales, with population data that points to need which is well evidenced;
- b. systems that evaluate evidence of effectiveness and help predict need;
- c. an infrastructure to help services scale up and adapt as families require us to;
- d. connectivity and integration with statutory services to promote better step up / down support, with minimum disruption.

Evidence-based family support – we welcome the underpinning principles in a Programme for Government that looks to protect, re-build and develop services for vulnerable children and their families, namely – more advocacy for parents on the edge of care, additional specialist support and the funding of regional care services for children with complex needs, the elimination of profit from the care of children looked after and strengthening public bodies in their role as corporate parents.

AWHOCs are working hard with Welsh Government and other partners to realise these commitments. We are pleased that Government is now addressing these matters in a systematic way, making clear the important role of partners in tackling the challenges that families face. Addressing the mental health services for children gap referred to as the ‘missing middle’ is key here alongside ensuring that trauma informed services that effectively tackle the impact of the underlying factors that lead to risk of child parent separation such as poverty, substance misuses, domestic abuse and poor mental health including mitigating these effects for care experienced children and young people. The introduction of a Family Drug and Alcohol Courts (FDAC) in Cardiff, is a promising development that might be considered for roll out as part of radical reform following evaluation.

While we know there will always be a focus on the overall headline number of children looked after by public bodies, it is equally important to examine trend data and rates at which children with a care and support plan remain with their families. Strength-based practice is key to this, and we look forward to building on what exists in Wales, including the Wales Safeguarding procedures via the National Practice Framework. It is our chief professional duty to work in a strength-based way.

The most radical reform that could be realised in this area is a reduction in workload for our social workers, coupled with an investment in services that can support reflective practice, including within partner organisations. There are many opportunities to take a ‘Once for Wales’ approach to support this, including digital transformation in the way that we communicate our best work in Wales.

Supporting parents and carers – we believe this is where partner agencies can truly come into their own. Relationship based work is essential, and whilst trauma, re-trauma and complex trauma makes for a complicated relationship-making environment, it is not insurmountable. To allow Foster Wales to inspire and drive change we need investment that ensures there is no distinction between the support afforded to foster carers, Special Guardians and adoptive families; one national way of providing financial support, although this may need to be tailored to the specific legal requirements for each. Therapeutic support is essential too in helping carers look after young people and managing the impact of secondary trauma.

Improving outcomes for children looked after and care leavers – we know that outcomes for children looked after and care leavers do not compare favourably with other children, and reform is required to close this gap.^{xiv} Reform is required to embed and develop systemic trauma informed services highlighted above are equally essential in this area.

An excellent example of the positive impact that trauma informed services can have for children looked after is happening at a residential care home, which is featured in the video. A therapist at the home explains how therapy, care and education are provided holistically in the care home setting. ‘Therapy is really important for the boys to achieve educationally,’ she says, ‘because the trauma that the young people in care have experienced can make it extremely difficult for them to learn in a conventional setting.’ One of the boys living at the care home comments, ‘I think I will look back on [what I have achieved] and say, “wow, I did that”. I never would have been in a healthy enough or suitable enough environment to be able to [achieve my educational goals] if I hadn’t come to [this care home], to the people who spent hours of their time trying to change the education system to help me.’’



For years, many authorities have struggled to access sufficient quality accommodation for those young people with the most complex needs. ADSS Cymru and AWHOCS would like to invite committee members to meet some local authority foster families and view some of the newly registered children's homes that demonstrate the essence of what good practice looks like for a reformed provision. The video features two residential care homes that are leading the way in terms of good practice. Both demonstrate how person-centred, holistic care, achieves positive outcomes for young people.

The improvements made in adoption support through our National Adoption Service arrangements has increased adoptive family satisfaction and is contributing to improved outcomes for the children placed alongside the introduction of these changes. Many of the services are low cost but high impact services which respond to the ongoing, often lifelong, implications of early trauma. The service models which include trauma informed, psychology-based approaches may work equally well for other care experienced children and young people in other post looked after permanence placements.

Sufficiency continues to be a struggle for many authorities and plans are in place to tackle this. Those plans will take time to come to fruition both in relation to fostering sufficiency and residential care. We took up the opportunity to respond to the Welsh Government's consultation in relation to Eliminate Profit and that can be found [here](#).^{xv} Whilst wholeheartedly supporting the objective of eliminate profit, a re-balance first approach is recommended. The current approach has contributed to an exacerbation of sufficiency challenges with our most vulnerable young people, with the public purse paying the price. For example, one local authority has seen a 25% increase in the average cost of placements in the last 12 months; a second authority reported a placement costing £19k a week compared with £12.5k in the previous year; whilst a third authority has seen £772k of additional pressure due to increasingly complex needs of children in residential care requiring additional support.^{xvi}

There is a more widely applicable salutary lesson here for future reforms; changes should take account of the risks for children and costs for services fully bearing in mind the context.

Turning to education, reform would do well to strengthen the implantation of virtual schools for looked after young people and to take account of the inspirational outcomes of care experienced employment schemes.

Matching ambition and investments – it is vital that sufficient, sustainable resources are in place to ensure capacity can meet the current considerable wave in demand.

We know from recent survey work we conducted with the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and the Society of Welsh Treasurers (SWT) that just for social services, local authorities identified that they were facing an overall financial pressure of £95.2m in the current financial year (with £20m of that pressure due to children’s residential placements), with both adults and children’s services facing inflationary and demand pressures and an estimated total cumulative pressure of £407.8m for 2023-24 and 2024-25.^{xvii} Despite our ambition and vision for social services, it should be noted that these financial pressures are just to ‘stand still’, significant investment will be required if we want to truly place social care on a sustainable footing for the future.

Local authorities across Wales continue to highlight challenges finding appropriate placements for children and young people. In particular, a lack of provision for children with complex needs in fostering and residential placement settings, with this driving up costs. Our members report that because children and young people are presenting with more complex and challenging behaviour, it is leading to increased demand for residential care placements.

There must be a greater focus on the further development and expansion of preventative services to meet need at the earliest possible point. We believe that a significant percentage increase in preventative services for vulnerable children should be made available. For example, for every £1 spent to meet immediate statutory demand an additional £2 should be spent on preventative services to reverse the current position. We would need to realise what that true cost would be based on current and future demand, which also takes into consideration how the market will change as we transition to a not-for-profit model for children’s services.

It is evident that year on year grant funding is not sustainable to meet the challenge, neither is a match-funding approach, which is heavily prevalent in the Health and Social Care Regional Integration Fund. Time-limited funding, accompanied by business processes that increase authorities’ workload are disproportionate to the numbers of children and families that are presenting and requiring support. Radical reform in this space would be Welsh Government properly resourcing local government to allow it to undertake its work of intervene with families earlier and prevent problems from escalating.

Conclusion

ADSS Cymru does recognise that there are significantly more children in local authority care than a decade ago. Yet, it must be emphasised that social workers across Wales support thousands of children and families, on a daily basis, to happily and positively remain together. The decision to place a child into care, is not made solely by local authorities, as there are



often a range of interrelated and complex factors that contribute to the decision-making process. Nevertheless, our duty is always to safeguard children at risk in line with our statutory duties.

We entirely support the incredible work being shaped and delivered by local government Children's Services in Wales. We see fabulous examples of best practice every day that prevent children from entering the care system. However, this is against a backdrop of a system that is fragmenting on a daily basis. A robust and supported social care workforce is the foundation to making the changes required.

ADSS Cymru recognise that there is still more to do to achieve radical reform and we remain committed, as sector leaders, to working alongside stakeholders to realise that endeavour. In the first instance, we look forward to working with the Welsh Government to co-produce meaningful definitions of what radical systemic reform should look like in the current landscape, to ensure we continue to make a positive difference to the lives of children and families living in Wales.

References

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