

Engagement Summary

Care experienced parents

June 2022

1. Background

1. In March 2022 the Petitions Committee decided to run an inquiry linked to the below petition:

Petition Number: P-06-1161:

Routine collection and publication of data on how many babies/children return to their care experienced parents' care at the end of a Parent and Child Placement

2. It was decided that to gain an in-depth picture of the ongoing situation around care experienced parents, there was a clear need to hear from people with lived experience. The Citizen Engagement Team proposed a qualitative approach to the engagement.

2. Participants

3. Between 1 April and 30 April 2022, the Citizen Engagement Team worked with 24 care experienced parents across Wales, including 20 females and 4 males
4. The Citizen Engagement Team facilitated four face-to-face focus groups with care-experienced parents across Wales. Two of these were held in South Wales and two were held in North Wales with participants taking part located across the regions.
5. Participants were sourced through conversations with National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS) Cymru and Voices from Care Cymru.

6. The objective of the engagement was to gather the views and experiences of care experienced parents.

3. Methodology

7. The format of engagement was largely comparable between sessions but varied slightly to meet participants' needs.
8. The key aims of the focus groups were to:
- Understand more about young people's experiences of having a child whilst in care themselves or as a care leaver.
 - Know if participants feel supported and get good quality practical and emotional support.
 - Understand what services and support are provided by local authorities, third sector or others and whether they meet young people and their children's needs.
9. Participants were asked the following questions to instigate discussion and tease out detail:
- What would you like to tell us about your experience of being a care-experienced parent?
 - When you have been pregnant, did you think professionals and services treated you differently because you were care experienced?
 - What help and support did you receive from social services and other services to prepare you to be a parent?
 - What help and support did you receive after your baby was born?
 - What would be the main things that would have helped you more or that you would like to see done differently?
 - Can you tell us about some of the extra practical and emotional difficulties that care experienced parents face?
10. Notes from each session are available on request.

4. Key Themes Emerging

11. Whilst each individual had nuanced personal stories, some clear overarching themes emerged during these discussions:

Stigma

12. In all of the focus groups, it was clear that Care Experienced parents felt that they faced a high level of stigma due to their past experiences. This led to frustrations from the participants who felt like this stigma then led to a poorer experience as they became parents themselves.

'The social worker was making out like we were just slobs, the support just wasn't there, and there is just a feeling of stigma straight away'

'There is a stigma around care leavers that affects you in so many different ways – choice of career/education, the list goes on. The lack of support and judgment I had was horrendous'

'I had a bottle of wine in the kitchen after Christmas. The social worker found it and poured it down the sink and said 'if you carry on then you'll end up like your mother – I hadn't even opened it. They made an assumption I was a drinker when I wasn't just because my mother was.'

13. There was also a high level of anger that the stigma associated with care experienced parents hadn't changed over the years with several participants concerned about the eventual impact this might have on their children.

'This stigma has been here for years – when will it change? Will it be the same for our kids?!? Feels like it will never stop. Why are we still fighting for these voices to be heard?'

14. Whilst the majority of frustrations around stigma were directed towards social services, there were also several concerns raised around the treatment received by several participants from the NHS.

'I had terrible hospital treatment. I felt more like a criminal than a new mother, to be honest with you, I was clearly being judged'

'The midwives were mostly lovely but you just feel that you are being judged by them, even though they don't know the situation as everything was confidential'

'You are damned from the start, the minute they know you are care experienced you are fighting an uphill battle. Just treat us like humans mun, you are in a hospital, and your child is taken off you, treated with zero respect because of these assumptions'

Social Services

15. Another key overarching theme that emerged from the focus groups was the negative relationship young parents commented on having with social services.
16. Whilst there were a few examples of positive stories emerging with individual social workers, the feeling amongst the majority of participants was that there were deeper problems within social services which needed addressing.

'They are not always truthful with what they say...they tell me to be honest and open, but then on the other foot they use everything and anything you say against you'

'Social workers are the ones that just don't help us, they turn up announced on days that are not suitable all the time, then they wonder why I am upset and that just has a negative ending for me, doesn't it? It makes me look not fit for purpose. They are doing it on purpose'

'Some social workers are ok, but they just take credit for stuff where they aren't involved in'

17. On several occasions, participants often felt that when interacting with social services, they felt under judgement and that their comments were often misconstrued.

'They were questioning that I was putting my daughter in clothes that were for younger girls, but she is very small for her age and they kept bringing it up as a

negative. If you are a parent you would know that but she kept picking on me for such small things'

'They told us the house wasn't tidy, so next time I made sure all the toys were away...what did they say? Oh where are all the toys...that was the next problem'

18. Another area that came up across multiple focus groups was the issue of foster care. Several individuals commented on negative experiences they have had and are still having with foster carers, with many sharing their belief that both the foster care and social services system wasn't fit for purpose.

'The Foster carer gets away with everything. I found that they tried to make me angry on purpose so they can say 'well she lost her temper – she has anger issues'

'Social needs to be re-trained. They neglect children who need help and seemingly target children who don't. There feel there is a big bias towards care children. I feel lots of them are power happy, I have come across several in the system and also in foster care...scrap it! '

Emotional Trauma

19. It was clear across all focus groups, that the past experiences of participants had led to an emotional strain being placed on them and their children. Many of the participants shared very personal stories of trauma.

'It's horrible – just horrible. It's hell seeing your child getting taken away from you, it makes me feel sick now even thinking about it, just traumatic'

'When the kids got taken away it ruined me, wrecked our lives. It was 14 weeks before I saw my son again and my daughter 14 months – we never saw them over lockdown so we could only see them over the camera – a rubbish camera at that'

20. Several of the participants commented on the negative impact these experiences had on their deteriorating mental health and the further implications of that.

'Ultimately - These are life and death issues we are dealing with- it can and has pushed young people to suicide'

'The stress adds to your mental health doesn't it – it's extra pressure when you don't need it at all, becoming a parent is a stressful enough time as it'

'My mental health has taken a battering, how are you supposed to deal with it all? I know people who haven't managed to and are in a terrible place. I feel lucky in a way that I managed to keep myself relatively intact, but the process of building yourself back up takes time and you need support'

Support

21. All participants commented on the invaluable support given to them by third-sector organisations, with many also noting how social services occasionally felt threatened by this support.

'Social think sometimes that we are going to 3rd sector orgs just to challenge and complain, but we are going there to get support'

'I get criticized for my past experiences all of the time, you feel they are judging you all the time and not set up to help you. Voices have supported me for 3 or 4 years now, and have helped me develop my wider network as well'

'I feel if I didn't have voices – god knows where I would be'

22. As well as complimenting third-sector organisations' emotional support, it was only noted in several instances how they provided invaluable practical support to young parents.

'I have a worker from Barnardo's who takes care of me now, and they were the person who told me eventually that social services weren't on my case now. Barnardo's were great in giving me whole person support'

NYAS have been great for me. You feel there isn't enough support with other things, bank accounts etc and that practical support is crucial. How do you pay

bills? How do you budget? How do you chase people with housing? That support makes a huge difference.

5. Suggestions for Improvements:

23. Participants suggested a few improvements that they believed needed to be made to improve their experiences. These included:

More emotional support:

24. Several participants noted how there was a clear need for more emotional support and that funding needed to be put in to prioritise this area.

'Don't look at us just as care kids just because previous generations have had issues doesn't mean we will. Put funding into the right support'

'We need more support that makes a difference, we need people to help us not judge us, they need to see us as real people'

Prevention:

25. Prevention was another area of improved mentioned by several participants with several emphasising the need to fix things for the next generation.

'Nothing will get fixed for us, I get that – but prevention for the next generation is crucial'

'The best way to prevent that is early psychological interventions for children going into care, so it's not brought up as an excuse later on'

Communication between agencies has got to be much better as well. Waiting times are extended due to rubbish communication, and when they do communicate crucial things are left out. Prevention is crucial'

Change to Social Care system:

26. A constant theme emerging was the need for a fundamental change to the social care system. Many felt failed by the system and several participants had strong thoughts on changes needed.

'Social needs to be re-trained. They neglect children who need help and seemingly target children who don't. It feels like there is a big bias toward care children. I feel lots of them are power happy, I have come across several in the system. SCRAP IT!

'Look at the models of parenting people are getting in foster care. We have all spoken about how we were told that we didn't have 'proper models of parenting', but that's the whole point of foster care. If that's their excuse then they need to fix the foster care system'