



Evidence briefing paper

Children looked after in Wales

This evidence briefing paper summarises some of the key issues related to children looked after in Wales; and reflects upon issues that we expect the incoming Welsh Government to face after the 2021 Senedd election. The paper looks specifically at the growing number and rate of children in care, and variation among local authorities. It also considers the four key factors that affect children's experiences and outcomes – reunification of children and birth families; the involvement of children and birth families in decisions about care; the joined-up provision of services for children and families; strategic commissioning, and the provision of children's care placements.

Key messages

- 1 Both the rate and number of children in care in Wales have been increasing** in recent years. This trend is a cause for concern; particularly the impact on the outcomes of children who are taken into care in terms of educational attainment, health, unemployment, homelessness, and criminal justice.
- 2 The Coronavirus pandemic is expected to have worsened the situation.** The impact of the pandemic on children and their families, especially the most vulnerable, will have increased the risks to children's wellbeing.
- 3 The overall national trend masks variations across local authorities in Wales,** with some seeing significant increases, while in other areas numbers have remained steady or dropped. Evidence suggests that these differences are linked to the interaction between safeguarding practice, levels of deprivation, and parental factors.
- 4 There tends to be a greater emphasis in Wales on finding permanent placements** for children rather than achieving reunification between birth families and their children. However, reunification is desired by many families; and facilitating positive relationships through whole-system models can support safe reunification.
- 5 Children and birth families have the right to be involved in decisions about their care,** and meaningful involvement can reduce feelings of instability for children in care.
- 6 The responsibility for children in care does not fall to social services departments alone.** A range of agencies provide services for children and families at risk, and improved working practices can facilitate better experiences, and outcomes, for those who come into contact with those services.
- 7 Strategic commissioning is a challenge** for Welsh local authorities, and better data collection, as well as more regionally-based commissioning, could alleviate the widespread problems with placement provision.

Growing numbers and rate of children looked after



There is significant concern about the sustained increase in the numbers and rate of children looked after in Wales. There is concern about the outcomes for care-experienced children – in terms of educational attainment, health, unemployment, homelessness, and criminal justice – in the UK and beyond. The steady overall increase in the number of children entering care over the past 20 years in Wales, and the wider UK, combined with needs which require increasingly complex care packages, are also contributing to the rising cost of securing sufficient, suitable, and stable placements. These issues are likely to be exacerbated by the pandemic.

This sustained increase is an indication of a system that is failing to support children and families adequately; it is a system in crisis. This conclusion is not to question the motivations or efforts of those working to support children and families, but rather to highlight that, despite their efforts, the available metrics indicate a worsening situation across Wales.

There are many reasons for this. In its ongoing research, the WCPP seeks to identify and understand the factors driving the increase; and to suggest how this can inform more appropriate and effective responses.

Variation in rates and practice in public services

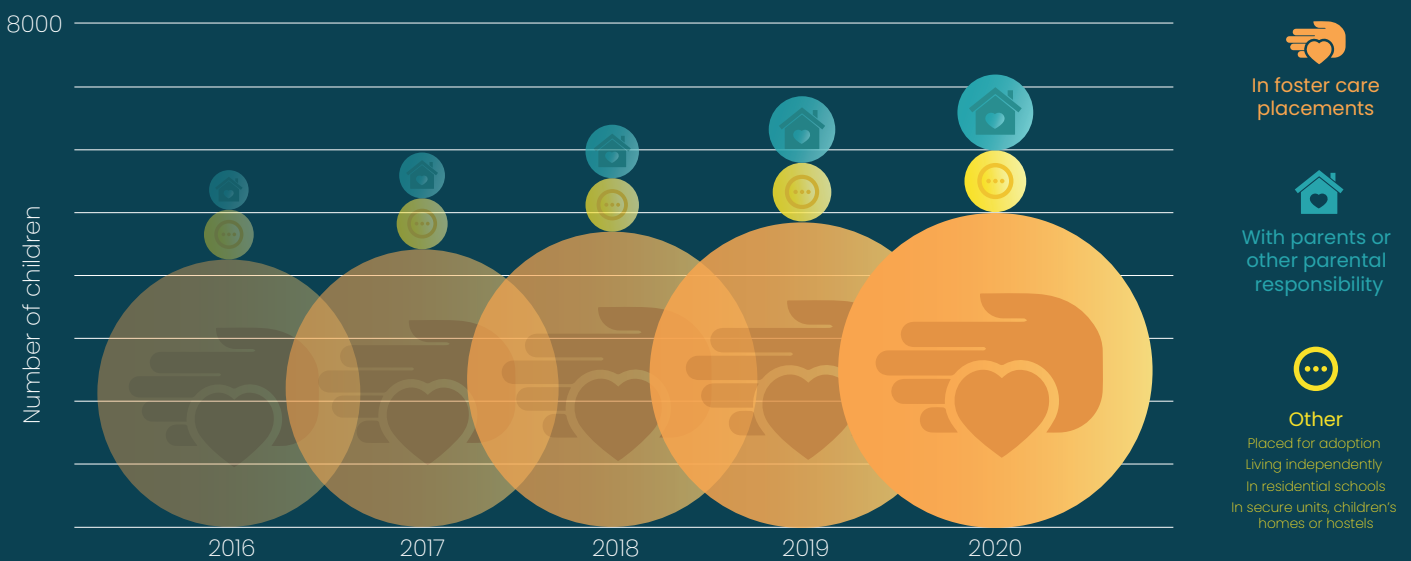


The gap between the rate of children looked after in Wales compared to other parts of the UK has continued to widen, and is likely to persist in coming years

Wales has consistently had a higher proportion of children and young people looked after than other UK nations. On 31 March 2020 there were 7,172 children looked after in Wales, a 25% increase from 2014.

The gap between the rate of children looked after in Wales compared to other parts of the UK has continued to widen, and is likely to persist in coming years. There is also variation in the decisions of the judiciary, with a higher rate of applications for care orders, and a higher conversion rate (care orders being granted) in Wales than in England. These children are mostly in foster placements, with a steady increase in those placed with parents, or those with parental responsibility.

Most children in care are in foster placements, with a steady increase in those placed with parents



Figures based on a snapshot of data on 31 March each year

Since 2016 there has been a steady increase in the number of children placed with parents, which means the child is subject to a care order and placed at home but under children looked after regulation

Within Wales there is significant variation among local authorities. Most have seen a rise in both the number and rate of children looked after, though some have seen the rate fall since 2014. For example, Neath Port Talbot has seen its rate fall from 155 per 10,000 in 2015 to 106 in 2020 – a fall equivalent to 49 fewer children looked after per 10,000. In contrast, Torfaen has seen its rate increase by an additional 75 children per 10,000 over the same period.

This variation is linked to:

- Levels of deprivation in the local area;
- The 'trigger trio' of domestic violence, substance misuse, and mental ill health, as well as parental learning disabilities; and
- Differences in safeguarding practice.

Combined, these factors account for almost three-quarters (72%) of the variation in rates across Wales.

Key factors affecting experiences and outcomes for children looked after



Differences in how public services work with families at risk are likely to affect the experiences and outcomes of children looked after. These include:

- How much emphasis is placed on achieving reunification with families;
- The extent to which children and their families are involved in decisions about children's care;
- The degree to which the provision of different services for families is 'joined-up', and responsive to their needs; and
- Strategic commissioning and the provision of placements.

Understanding these factors can provide insight into the current care system in Wales and how it might be improved. Each is discussed below.

Reunification of children and birth families

The rates of children in care are not only affected by the number of children coming into the system, but also the number of children leaving care. There has been a steady decline in flows out of the care system in recent years. While reunification is the most common reason for children leaving care, since 2014 the number of children returning to live with parents, relatives, or others with parental responsibility has declined.

Facilitating relationships between young people in out-of-home care and their families – where it is safe to do so – can therefore hold great value for both the child and their birth family

In some countries, more emphasis is placed on promoting reunification between children and their birth families than in Wales and the wider UK.

UK nations tend to focus on securing permanent placements as soon as possible for children who cannot remain with their families through kinship care, long-term fostering, or adoption. This means that particularly in non-kinship care situations, the birth family often loses meaningful responsibility for their child, even where they continue to have contact.

In contrast, in countries such as Sweden, New Zealand, Germany, Denmark and Norway, more emphasis is placed on the continuing responsibility of birth parents, even when the child cannot live with them. There seems to be more tolerance of uncertainty; and for children in long-term placements, more effort is put into working with the families to improve care and support, as preparation for potential reunification. The legal frameworks in these countries also provide for a more nuanced relationship between family parenting and corporate parenting. For example, in Alberta, Canada, there are legal requirements to provide the 'least intrusive' interventions possible, and to explore kinship care options.

Reunification is desired by many families, and the quality of the relationship between young people and parents is an important consideration in decisions about children returning home. **Facilitating relationships between young people in out-of-home care and their families – where it is safe to do so – can therefore hold great value for both the child and their birth family.** There has been some work to understand how particular interventions might support relationships between children and their birth families in the UK, such as Family Group Conferencing, but less on how institutions and systems can do this.

Involving children and birth families in decisions about care

The rights of children and their birth families to participate in the decision-making process about their care have been established by the United Nations Convention on the Human Rights of the Child. A children's rights approach to care is recommended by the Children's Commissioner for Wales. In some countries, such as Sweden and Norway, listening to the child's 'voice' is mandated by law.

Greater involvement in decisions about placement moves can also help to reduce feelings of instability for children in care

Evidence suggests that children and their families have a unique and crucial perspective on the care system, and that incorporating their views into decisions about their care can have a positive impact on them, and on commissioning.

Acknowledging their insights can help to:

- Determine what works for children in care and what can be improved;
- Demonstrate how local authorities are meeting requirements to listen to children about changes in services that affect them;
- Form the basis for new frameworks for improvements in child-led services that complement and enhance existing frameworks; and
- Facilitate the sharing of good practice between local authorities.

Greater involvement in decisions about placement moves can also help to reduce feelings of instability for children in care. Models or ways of working used by child and family protection, and support services, should place the wishes of young people and their family at the centre of the development of support plans, while recognising that the child's age, level of understanding, and circumstances may mean this is not always possible.

Joined-up provision of services for children and families

Children and families come into contact with a range of services based on a continuum of needs, from universal support (e.g. schools, health services) through to intensive, statutory interventions (e.g. children taken into care).

Historically, the responsibility for children looked after has tended to fall on children's and family services. However, many other departments and agencies also support children and families before and after care proceedings begin. Growing awareness of the detrimental impact on children of the 'trigger trio' factors of domestic violence, parental substance misuse, and parental mental health issues means a range of statutory and voluntary bodies are more actively engaged in safeguarding activities, and identifying those at risk. There is evidence of increasing numbers of referrals coming via the police, primary/community health, and other departments of an area's own or other local authority.

This kind of joined-up working still requires improvement, particularly in relation to domestic abuse. The Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (VAWDASV) Act (2015) was in part aimed at improving prevention, protection and support, harmonising services, and improving leadership and collaboration.

Integrated service delivery, such as between local authorities and third-sector providers, can improve services, and benefit care leavers

Following the introduction of the Act, evidence suggests that regional and partnership working in general has increased, but cooperation and 'buy-in' from leadership across the public sector is still patchy. Examples of good practice, such as domestic abuse hubs that facilitate joined-up working, are not widespread across Wales. Greater scrutiny of regional working and secure, long-term funding could improve services designed to tackle domestic abuse, and have positive implications for children and families at risk of entering the care system.

Joined-up working is also important in supporting children leaving care. Support for care leavers is required under the Welsh Government's When I Am Ready scheme, but care-experienced young people are still more likely to be homeless than the general population. Efforts have been made to prevent homelessness for care leavers, such as training flats whereby young people can experience independent living. Integrated service delivery, such as between local authorities and third-sector providers, can improve services, and benefit care leavers.

Strategic commissioning and the provision of children's care placements

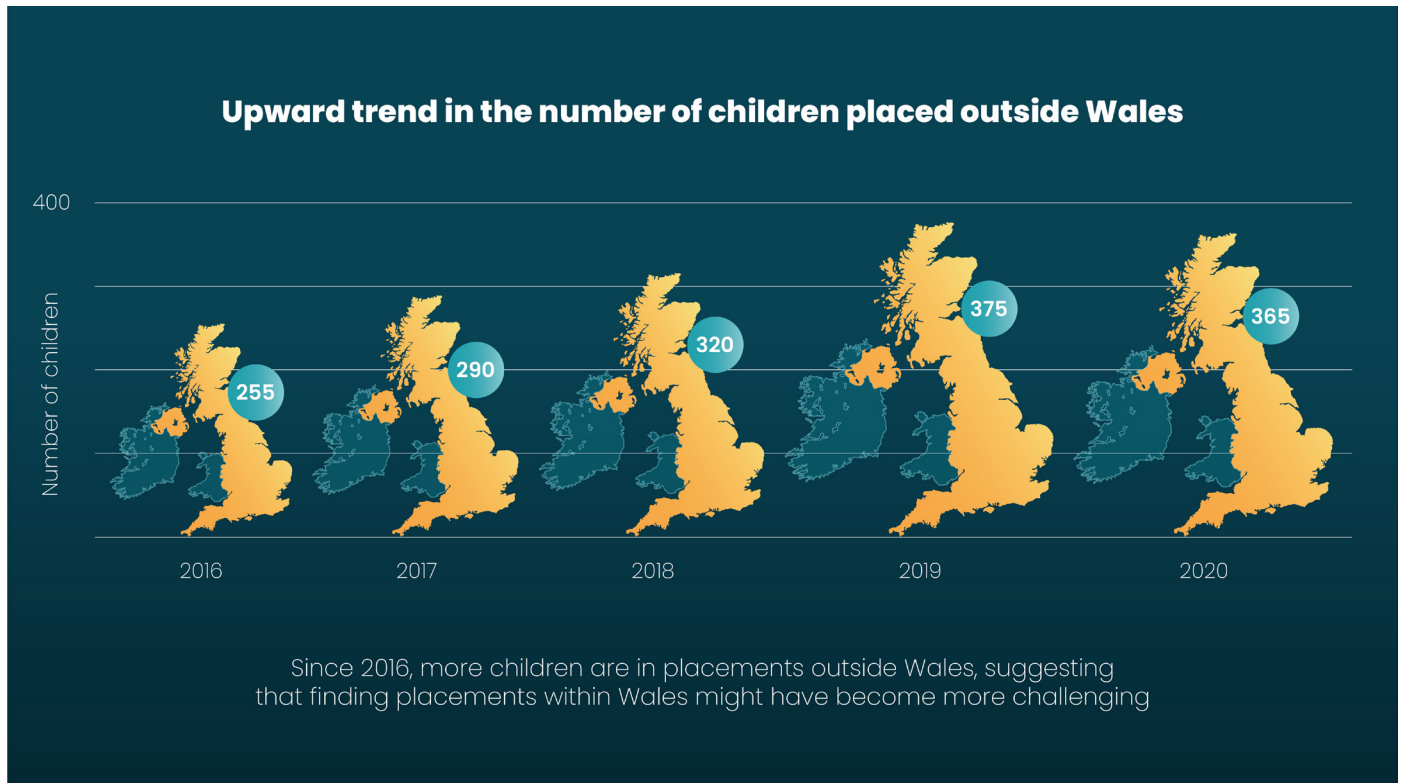
Strategic commissioning involves actively monitoring need, pre-empting future need, and shaping provision (of placements and services) to adequately respond to this. **Local authorities in many countries, including Wales, find strategic commissioning challenging**, and no country can be said to have successfully overcome the challenge of strategic commissioning.

Approaches to improve strategic commissioning include regional or national collaboration. Some countries have systems in place whereby local authorities work together on a regional or national basis to increase their buying power and influence over the market. This kind of regional/national commissioning is not generally widespread in Wales. Strategic commissioning capacity in Welsh local authorities is also limited, and poor data availability and integrity is undermining its effectiveness.

While planned placement moves can reflect a healthy journey through care, frequent and unplanned moves may cause children and young people to feel distressed and isolated

This can cause challenges in the placement provision process across Wales, making matching children to a suitable placement difficult. This in turn can lead to placement instability. While planned placement moves can reflect a healthy journey through care, frequent and unplanned moves may cause children and young people to feel distressed and isolated.

These challenges have prompted concern that there are not enough appropriate placements for children needing care in Wales. While most (66%) are placed in their 'home' local authority, around one in 20 (5%) are placed outside Wales (though this may be because they are placed with family living further away). This number has been increasing since 2016.



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You can read all of our work on children looked after [here](#).



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The Centre is independent of government but works closely with policymakers and practitioners at national and local level to develop fresh thinking about how to address some of the key economic, social and environmental challenges facing Wales.

The Centre's work covers a wide range of policies but is currently focused in particular on:


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- Tackling loneliness and social isolation
- Children looked after
- Economy and skills
- Health and adult social care
- Effective governance and implementation

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