

Care experienced children

Research Briefing

April 2024



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Care experienced children

Research Briefing

April 2024

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The Committee for the Scrutiny of the First Minister is holding a session on **26 April 2024** with the First Minister, Vaughan Gething MS, about care experienced children. This briefing sets out some of the key issues the Committee may cover.



This scrutiny session was arranged following the publication in 2023 of two Senedd Committee reports about support for care experienced children:

- The Children Young People and Education Committee report: **If not now, then when? Radical reform for care experienced children and young people**
- The Petitions Committee report: **Supporting care experienced parents** (summarised in this Senedd Research article **Radical reform of services for care experienced children**.)

This briefing includes information on:

- **Programme for Government commitments**, including: the Basic Income Pilot; Eliminating Profit from the care of looked after children; Exploring the radical reform of care services for children and young people.
- **Numbers of children in care and their long term outcomes.**
- **The Welsh Government's role as the corporate parent and grandparent.**
- **Children's social care workforce challenges and financial pressures.**

It also includes information about **Child Poverty**.

Senedd Research has also published a **Statistical Briefing on Care Experienced-Children 2024**.

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1. Care Experienced Children: Context

More than one child in every one-hundred children in Wales is now in care and has the 'state' acting as their parent. Numbers have increased significantly; **7,210 children** were looked after by Welsh local authorities as at 31 March 2023, an increase of 26% since 2014. The **care rate in Wales** increased by 83% between 2003 and 2022.

This recently updated **Statistical Briefing on Care Experienced Children 2024** sets out a wide range of other information.

Terminology: Whilst the term 'care experienced children' is widely used, current Welsh Government statistics still refer to 'children looked after'. This term has a legal meaning and refers to children under 18 who are 'looked after' by local authorities. This briefing therefore uses 'children looked after' and 'looked after children' as relevant when referring to that data, otherwise using 'care experienced children'.

Ministerial responsibility: As Minister for Health and Social Services, Vaughan Gething had overall responsibility for care experienced children between 2016 and 2021. Julie Morgan MS was Deputy Minister for Social Services from 2018, and Dawn Bowden MS has recently been appointed as Minister for Social Care.

1.1. The former First Minister's personal commitment

Vaughan Gething does not refer to care experienced children in his manifesto. In 2018, Mark Drakeford had set out a personal commitment to improving the care experiences of children and his **Manifesto for the leadership of Labour** set out very specific proposals at that time:

Proposals

I believe that this is one of a small number of areas where new, binding targets need to be set by Welsh Government, to ensure that the problem really does get gripped and resolved.

Those would include:

1. A target for each local authority to reduce the number of children from that locality placed outside Wales.
2. A target for each local authority to reduce the number of children from that locality placed outside their own county.

3. A target for each local authority to reduce the number of children from that locality removed from the care of their family, including kinship care.
4. A specific target for each local authority to reduce the number of children taken away from families on the grounds that parents have a learning disability.

More recently during **Plenary** in March 2024, Jane Dodds MS, Chair of the **Cross Party Group on Children in Our Care** referred to the then First Minister, Mark Drakeford MS, saying:

There are many champions here in the Siambr and across all of our political parties for care-experienced children... But, First Minister, if I may say, one of the biggest champions here in the Siambr is you.

1.2. Summits with care experienced children and young people

Mark Drakeford MS held a series of '**Care Experienced Summits**' between himself, as then First Minister, Cabinet Ministers, and some care experienced children and young people. Referring to those championing the case for care experienced children, Mark Drakeford **said**:

...the greatest champions of all are those young people themselves. They were absolutely fantastic at the summit—so articulate, so insightful, so determined to make their contribution to a different future for themselves, but also a different sort of service for those other young people in the system. They were absolutely insistent that we amplify their voice in the whole service. 'With us, not for us', they kept saying.

Going on to say:

...They wanted the simplest things. They wanted stability, consistency, early help, advocacy services for parents when families are trying to stay together rather than children being removed from them. They wanted us to attend to the gaps that are still there when children fall between social services, housing, criminal justice, mental health, and, above all, they wanted us to be ambitious for them.

In May 2023, the then First Minister and representatives of care experienced young people signed a **Radical Reform Summit: Declaration**. Some of the same young people also **told the Children, Young People and Education (CYPE) Committee** about the commitments they wanted to see the Welsh Government deliver.

1.3. Scrutiny in the Senedd

There has been significant scrutiny of services and support for care experienced children during this Sixth Senedd. Much of this focuses on the Welsh Government's eight **Programme for Government** commitments in this policy area.

In May 2023, the Senedd's Children Young People and Education Committee published its report **If not now, then when? Radical reform for care experienced children and young people**. This followed on from the report of the Senedd Petitions Committee about Supporting care experienced parents. You can read more about the scrutiny by those Committees in the Senedd Research article [Radical reform of services for care experienced children](#).

“If not now, then when?” CYPE Committee report on care experienced children

The title of the Children, Young People and Education Committee's **report into radical reform for care experienced children** referred to the evidence its Members **heard directly** from a wide range of care experienced children and birth parents it met across Wales.

Taking into account government landmark reports commissioned by the respective governments in **England** and **Scotland**, the Committee's inquiry was wide reaching. It sought to examine priorities for radically reforming the following three aspects of the care system:

- **Before care:** Safely reducing the number of children in the care system.
- **In care:** Quality services and support for children in care.
- **After care:** On-going support when young people leave care.

Members held a **series of discussions** with a wide range of stakeholders including frontline practitioners and managers; academics; and service providers. They also heard from both the President of the Family Court and the Family Division Liaison Judge for Wales, responsible for deciding whether children enter the care system or not.

The CYPE Committee's **subsequent report** identified 12 policy areas where it said radical reform is needed. It made 27 recommendations “to drive urgent and much-needed change”, concluding:

Anybody claiming that the state is doing its corporate parenting job well should consider whether they would be happy for their own child to be cared for by that system.

It received UK wide media coverage: **Major reforms to Welsh care system needed** and referred to a 'shocking' rise in the number of children in care. The Welsh Government's **response** fully accepted four of the recommendations, accepting 16 in part and rejecting seven.

“Uncomfortable listening”: Petitions Committee report on care experienced parents

The CYPE Committee **report refers to** a “cycle of care”, saying it was “appalled” that around a quarter of young people who have been in care will go on to have at least one of their own children removed by the state.

This follows detailed scrutiny of this issue by the **Petitions Committee**. It undertook an inquiry into support for care experienced parents following a **petition calling for** “routine collection and publication of data of how many babies/children return to their care experienced parents’ care at the end of a Parent and Child Placement”.

The Committee’s report drew on data from the **Wales care-leavers and their children placed for adoption Study**, which found “more than a quarter (27%) of birth mothers and a fifth (19%) of birth fathers with children placed for adoption were themselves care leavers”.

The Petitions Committee concluded the evidence it heard “made for uncomfortable listening”. Referring to “prejudice and pre-judgement, and harrowing tales of individuals struggling to build better lives for themselves and their loved ones”.

2. Programme for Government commitments

Senedd scrutiny includes Children, Young People and Education Committee report May 2023 **Services for care experienced children: exploring radical reform**

The Welsh Government's **Programme for Government** (PfG) includes a series of commitments relevant to care experienced children, including to:

- Prevent families breaking up by funding advocacy services for parents whose children are at risk of coming into care.
- Provide additional specialist support for children with complex needs who may be on the edge of care.
- Explore radical reform of current services for children looked after and care leavers.
- Eliminate private profit from the care of children looked after.
- Fund regional residential services for children with complex needs ensuring their needs are met as close to home as possible and in Wales wherever practicable.
- Strengthen public bodies in their role as 'corporate parent'.
- Pilot an approach to the **Basic Income**.
- Support our national Fostering Wales scheme.

The Welsh Government publishes annual updates on progress against all PfG commitments, the latest being the **Annual Report** in July 2023.

2.1. PfG commitment: Basic Income Pilot

The **Welsh Government's Basic Income for Care Leavers** pilot provides eligible care-experienced young people with a basic income payment of £1,600 per month (£1,280, after-tax), for 24 months from the month after their 18th birthday.

The pilot is being delivered for 36 months from July 2022, with individuals entering and exiting the pilot during this timeframe according to their birth date. An **overview of the scheme** sets out the eligibility criteria, stating a young person can take part in the pilot if they:

- are leaving care and turning 18 years of age between 1 July 2022 and 30 June 2023;

- have been looked after by a local authority for a period of 13 weeks, or periods amounting in total to 13 weeks, which began after he or she reached 14 and ended after he or she reached 16; and,
- are resident in Wales, or have been placed outside of Wales but are supported by a Welsh local authority's social services department.

In addition to the financial support, the pilot offers eligible young people support for budgeting and managing finances.

A total of £20 million was initially allocated to deliver the pilot and the Welsh Government **estimated** that over 500 young people would be eligible. The latest **published statistics** show that 635 young people had received the basic income payment as at 31 July 2023.

The **CYPE Committee report** did not scrutinise the pilot in detail. It reserved judgement, saying:

The Basic Income pilot is a bold and ambitious policy. The evidence suggests that there are reasons to be optimistic about the pilot, and its long-term impact on the lives of the young people who are eligible for it. But the evidence also suggests that there are also real causes for concern. These concerns were shared with us by care leavers and people who work day-in and day-out with incredibly vulnerable care leavers. They were shared with us in the context of discussions around substance misuse and organised crime. We urge the Welsh Government not to take those concerns lightly.

Evaluation of the pilot

The Welsh Government issued a **written statement** when the first **evaluation of the pilot: annual report 2023-24** was published in February 2024. Cardiff University's Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre (CASCADE) **is carrying out this four-year evaluation**, which aims to:

- Test whether the Welsh Basic Income Pilot has an impact on intended outcomes and estimate how much of an effect it has.
- Understand how and why the Welsh Basic Income Pilot works, for whom and under which circumstances.
- Identify, measure and value the costs and outcomes of the Welsh Basic Income Pilot to calculate its cost effectiveness.

The introduction to the 2023 to 2024 report says:

No other basic income scheme has given regular payments as large as those received by young people involved in the pilot, nor have other basic income schemes been open to a national cohort of care leavers from the age of 18 for two years of payments.

Further evaluation reports are scheduled to 2027, with the initial evaluation survey of all basic income recipients having a response rate of 64%. Those surveyed were asked about a range of things including their financial, housing, education/employment and wellbeing outcomes. This first evaluation does not yet set out information about how the pilot is experienced by young people saying:

These initial findings highlight the radical nature of this intervention and some early insights into the complexity of implementing it with a geographically dispersed group of young adults facing a range of barriers in comparison to the general population. Evaluating its impact presents a number of methodological challenges, but there is no doubt that the findings will contribute to the evidence base on both basic income schemes and the support needs of care-experienced young people. This evaluation is complex, comprehensive and lengthy. There will be further reports over the next few years, and in future outputs we will revisit the topics and themes covered here.

2.2. PfG commitment: eliminating profit from children's care

The 2021 **Co-operation Agreement** between the Welsh Government and Plaid Cymru restated a commitment to “eliminate private profit from the care of children looked after”.

In August 2022, the Welsh Government issued a consultation on **Proposed changes to primary legislation: Eliminating profit from the care of children looked after**”. This is expected to be included in a new **Social Care Bill**, set to be introduced to the Senedd in the near future.

In March, the former First Minister said that a Social Care Bill **would be introduced** “soon after Easter”, however, its introduction was **recently postponed**.

The Social Care Bill is anticipated to be primary legislation that permits only not-for-profit providers to register with Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) as a care home service for children or a fostering service. This would mean that only not-for-profit providers would be permitted to operate within Wales with the **consultation proposals** saying that:

- New providers registering with CIW will have to have not-for-profit status from 1 April 2026; and

- Any current 'for profit' providers will need to transition to, and register with CIW, as not for profit status by 1 April 2027.

The Competition and Markets Authority published a **Children's social care market study report** and a **Wales summary** in 2022 saying children's social care services in Wales cost around £350 million a year, but it does not estimate how much of that is profit. It found:

Overall, our view is that there are significant problems in how the placements market is functioning, particularly in England and Wales. We found that:

- a lack of placements of the right kind, in the right places, means that children are not consistently getting access to care and accommodation that meets their needs
- the largest private providers of placements are making materially higher profits, and charging materially higher prices, than we would expect if this market were functioning effectively; and
- some of the largest private providers are carrying very high levels of debt, creating a risk that disorderly failure of highly leveraged firms could disrupt the placements of children in care

Plans for legislative change

As of June 2023, the Welsh Government **estimates** that **1880 children** in the care of Welsh local authorities placed in independent/ private placements in Wales.

- Placed with independent foster agencies: 1284
- Placed with independent residential providers: 596

The Welsh Government also **says**:

A workstream has been established under the Eliminating Profit Programme Board on planning transition for individual children and young people. The workstream will consider the actions needed to support a smooth transition from the current market arrangements to the new not-for-profit arrangements which will come into effect from April 2026.

The Welsh Government has **committed £68 million** over three years to support the objective of eliminating private profit from the care of children looked after. The profile of that spend is outlined in information provided to the CYPE Committee:

The profile of that spend is outlined in information provided to the CYPE committee.

Annual breakdown of £68m

2022/23	£13m
2023/24	£26m
2024/25	£29m

2.3. PFG commitment: to explore radical reform

A potentially significant Welsh Government **Programme for Government** commitment relating to care experienced children is that to:

Explore radical reform of current services for children looked after and care leavers.

However the CYPE Committee sought more details on what this meant in practice and the perceived absence of detail led to its scrutiny and subsequent report:

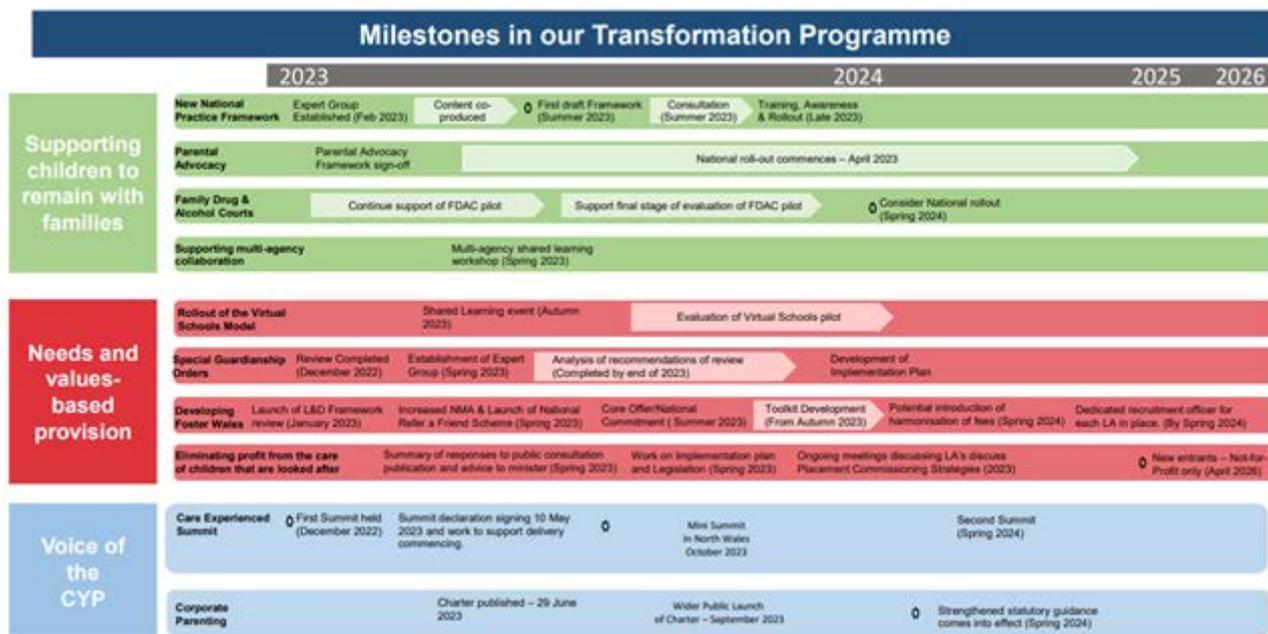
Radical reform of services for care experienced children: “If not now, then when?” It concluded:

Anybody claiming that the state is doing its corporate parenting job well should consider whether they would be happy for their own child to be cared for by that system.

“Transformation of Children’s Services”

Annex A of this Welsh Government **paper** sets out Terms of Reference for a: ‘Transformation of Children’s Services Delivery Group’ and a ‘Ministerial Oversight Board for Wales’ saying:

The Transformation of Children’s Services Delivery Group’s status is to lead and drive forward the delivery of 8 Programme for Government commitments for children’s social services holistically, ensuring those commitments are in place and embedded by 2026.



A new National Practice Framework from April 2024

The Welsh Government’s written evidence to the CYPE Committee in March 2023 referenced the development of a ‘National Practice Framework’ for Children’s Social Care. That paper referred to the work commencing in September 2022 and said:

As part of our work to transform children’s services in Wales we are developing a National Practice Framework. The Framework will set out how we work in Wales in a strengths-based way to ensure the best outcomes for our most vulnerable children and young people.

The National Practice Framework will be a mix of mandatory requirements and practice pointers, rooted in strengths-based relational practice. Key aspects of practice must be consistent across Wales if every child and family is to receive a similar service at a common threshold.

More recently the first six new standards are stated as being:

- The Child-inclusive practice standard;
- The Trusted Adults standard;
- Eyes on the child: the Child Safeguarding standard;
- The Missing children and young people standard;
- The Continuing Care standard;
- The Manageable workloads standard.

The original timeline for these standards to be in place appears to be delayed. In August 2023, the Welsh Government set out the following timeline, with the roll out planned for ‘late 2023’.

Milestones in our Transformation Programme



However, it recently stated that the first 6 new standards would be finalised by the end of March 2024, with the others being co-produced by the end of 2024.

A new National Office for Care and Support from April 2024

The new **National Office for Care and Support** should also be relevant to care experienced children. It was **formally launched** 22 April 2024 as part of the Welsh Government's **Rebalancing Care and Support Programme**. This new National Office will sit within Welsh Government and will have three core functions: oversight of and compliance with the National Framework; the development and implementation of the National Care Service; and support for the Chief Social Care Officer.

A recent letter to the **Cross Party Group on Children in Our Care** set out further information:

The establishment of an out-ward facing National Office will enable a focus on innovation, improvement, and transformation of adult and children's services. It will build on progress already made in improving collation of social care data, developing a clearer picture of the delivery of services, and supporting the Chief Social Care Officer in championing a stronger voice for the sector.

It goes on to say:

This year (2024-25) will be a transitional year for the National Office for Care and Support, with the opportunity to establish the right mechanisms and ways of working needed to realise the full benefit of the National Office as it matures.

3. Care rates and outcomes for children

Senedd scrutiny includes: Children, Young People and Education CYPE Committee report May 2023 **Services for care experienced children: exploring radical reform.**

3.1. Care rates

Mark Drakeford's **Manifesto for the leadership of Labour** in 2018 said that “too many children are taken away from their families and into the care system in Wales” and set out a proposal for:

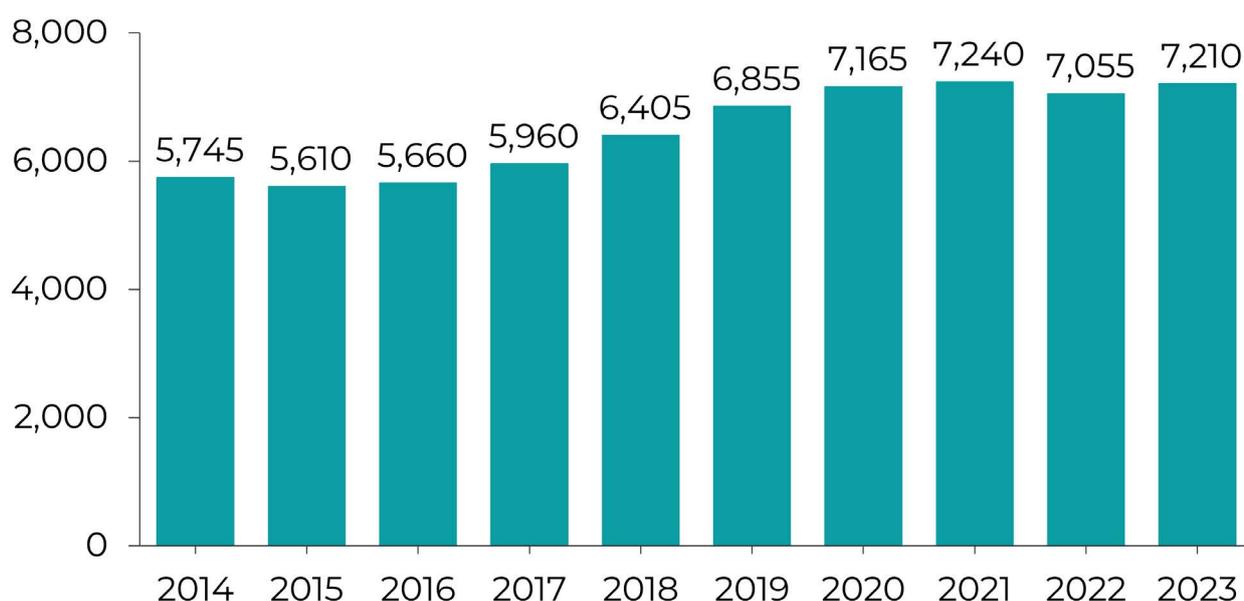
A target for each local authority to reduce the number of children from that locality removed from the care of their family, including kinship care.

Local authorities expressed concerns about ‘targets’. and in response to a **letter from the Fifth Senedd Children, Young People and Education Committee** the then First Minister later **referred to them** as “co-produced bespoke reduction expectation” plans.

Despite this aim, **numbers of children in care have continued to rise**. The care rate in Wales increased by 83% between 2003 and 2022, with more than 1% of children under 18 currently in care.

Our Senedd Research statistical briefing sets out that 7,210 children were looked after by Welsh local authorities as at 31 March 2023, an increase of 26% since 2014.

Children looked after ar 31 March



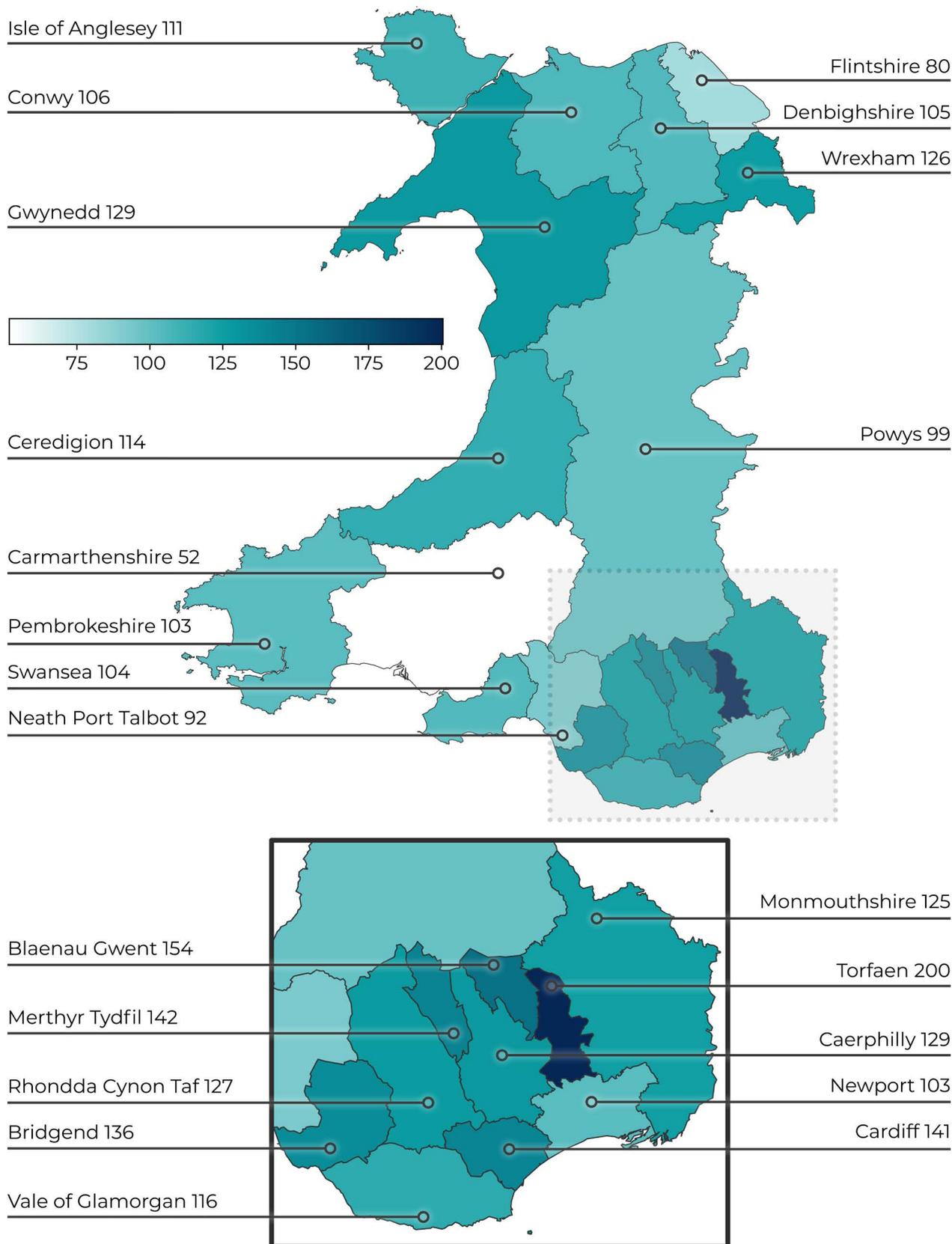
Source: StatsWales, [Children looked after at 31 March by local authority, gender and age](#)

In December 2023, the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory published research on [Understanding care pathways and placement stability for babies in Wales](#). It found that between 1 April 2003 and 31 March 2021 in Wales, 6,333 babies entered care for the first time. Of these babies, 45% (2,879) were under 4 weeks old. Over one third (38%, 2,430) were newborn babies. It also found there was

...considerable variation in the incidence rates of babies entering care for the first time between the 22 local authorities in Wales, with 7 local authorities having higher than average incidence rates, and 9 local authorities having lower than average incidence rates.

Our [Statistical Briefing on Care Experienced Children 2024](#) also sets out that rates of looked after children vary between local authorities from **52 per 10,000 of the population aged under 18 in Carmarthenshire to 200 per 10,000 in Torfaen**.

Looked after children per 10,000 of the population aged under 18 at 31 March 2023; by area



Higher rates of children in care than England

In 2023, there were **116 per 10,000** children in the care of Welsh local authorities, compared to **71 per 10,000** in the care of local authorities in England.

Referring to the significantly higher rates of children in care in Wales compared to England, Judge Francis, then Family Division Liaison Judge for Wales, told the CYPE Committee this was “**an awkward statistic**”. He **also said**:

There is some anecdotal evidence that some local authorities, some children’s services, are expecting different standards from others, and that some judges do.

Yet the legal basis in both countries is the same. Section 31 of the **Children Act 1989** sets out the requirements for a care order, known as the ‘threshold criteria’. A decision will be made by the court applying the ‘welfare checklist’ under **section 1(3) Children Act 1989**. The burden of proof is on the local authority to establish that these criteria are met, namely:

S31(2) A court may only make a care order or supervision order if it is satisfied—

1. that the child concerned is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm; and
2. that the harm, or likelihood of harm, is attributable to—
3. the care given to the child, or likely to be given to him if the order were not made, not being what it would be reasonable to expect a parent to give to him; or
4. the child’s being beyond parental control.

Why have rates increased?

There are multiple influences on the rates of children in the care of Welsh local authorities. Local authorities **point to** the **increasing complexity** of the circumstances of children coming into care. Deprivation, substance misuse, parental mental health and learning disabilities are all part of a complex picture which has led to an increase in children going into care. Domestic abuse is a key factor in the lives of 75% of birth mothers who have had one or more children permanently removed.

It could be argued that social workers are **'damned if they do and damned if they don't'**. There are numerous high profile tragic cases such as Logan Mwangi, Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson where there are concerns that stronger intervention from agencies services could have prevented the death of a child. The British Association of Social Workers **says child abuse and neglect** are hidden and hard to prove and that "social workers are very apprehensive about getting things 'wrong'" which "will be extremely hard to change while the media and politicians are so ready to condemn social workers and others when they make mistakes".

Cwm Taf Safeguarding Board published its **Child Practice Review** on 2022, following the tragic death of Logan Mwangi. A subsequent **Rapid review of child protection arrangements by Care Inspectorate Wales** looked at "to what extent the current structures and processes in Wales ensure children's names are appropriately placed on, and removed from, the child protection register when sufficient evidence indicates it is safe to do". **Interim findings** were published in June 2023 followed by its **final report** in September 2023. One of its findings is that **"practitioners' understanding of the risk of significant harm to children is variable"**, and "linked to the high turnover of children service's practitioners which means families have to build trust with new practitioners time and time again". It made numerous recommendations including that:

A national drive is required to improve a shared understanding and awareness of thresholds and relevant guidance. This should focus on multi-agency understanding and consistent decision making when assessing risk.

3.2. Long term outcomes for care experienced children

There is very limited published information about long term outcomes for individual children. Available data is referred to in this **Statistical Briefing on Care Experienced Children 2024**.

More than 300 homeless care leavers in a year

The Social Services Performance and Improvement Framework includes data on the total number of care leavers who experience homelessness during the year (as defined by the Housing (Wales) Act 2014) by local authority. **Latest figures for 2022-23** show that **315 care leavers were homeless in that 12-month period, compared to 170 in 2020-21**. 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. The published statistics do not tell us what percentage of the relevant population of young people leaving care this is.

A recent CYPE Committee **letter to the then Minister for Climate Change** set out its response to the Welsh Government's consultation on the **White Paper on ending homelessness in Wales**. It referred to the housing needs of care experienced parents, saying they "can be complex and yet have a significant impact of whether their own birth children can remain in their care". It also said 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", in line with the recommendations of the Welsh Government's **Expert Group Review**. The CYPE Committee said:

During our inquiry we heard many warm words and stated good intentions about corporate parenting for care experienced children and young people. Yet so many times we heard directly from young people that these are not being translated into concrete actions and did not make a genuine difference to their lives, even at times of crisis. Based on the direct lived experience of the many care leavers in Wales that we had the privilege to speak to, it is clear that significant changes are needed in order for housing to play its vital part as a corporate parent.

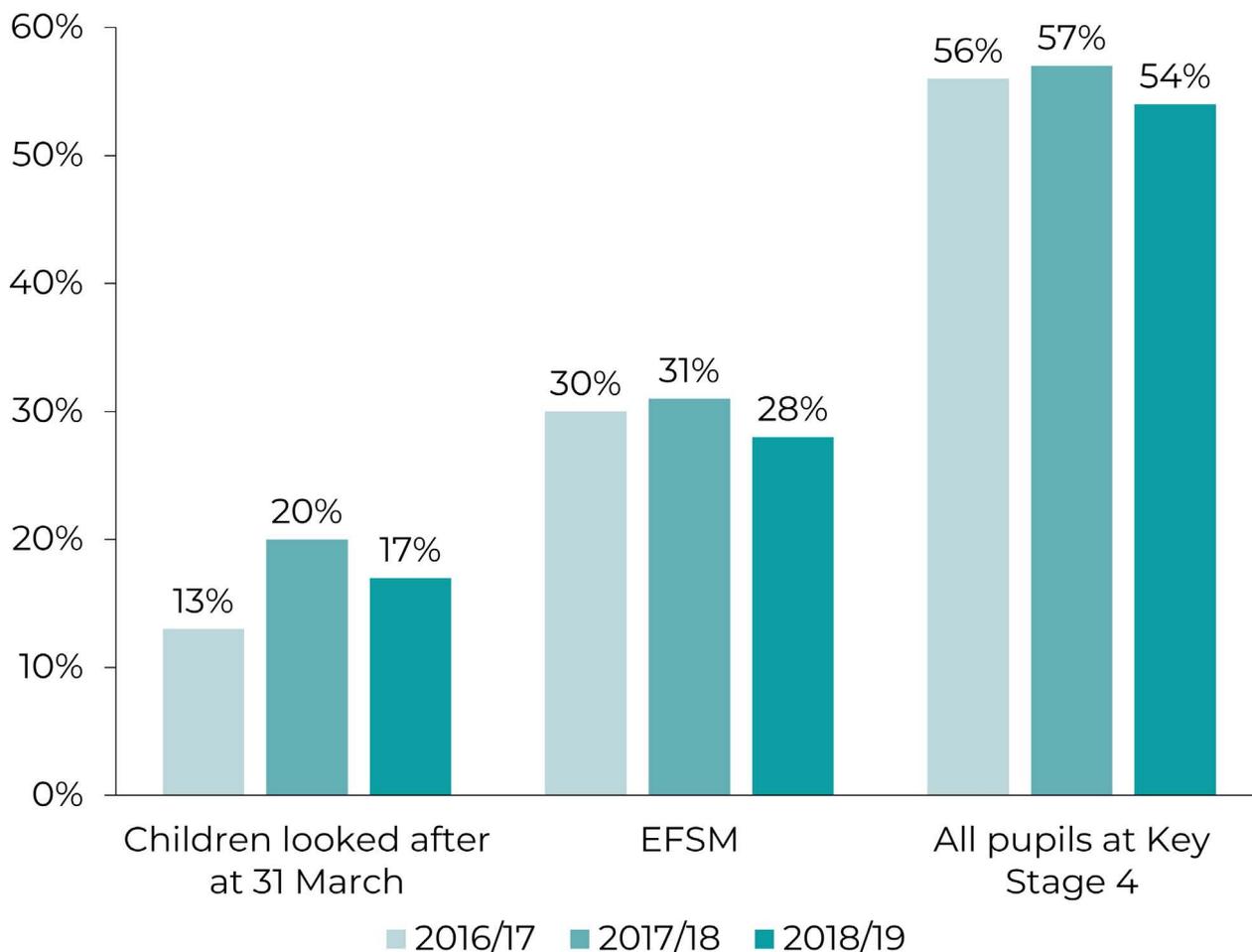
Educational attainment

The Welsh Government's strategy '**Raising the ambitions and educational attainment of children who are looked after**' was published in 2016. It says:

The Welsh Government has set a national target in the educational attainment of children who are looked after by raising the attainment of 15 year-olds at Key Stage 4 of the Level 2 inclusive threshold from 17% in 2014 to 25% in 2016 as reported in the Children in Need Census.

Due to the suspension of school performance measures during the pandemic, the percentage of children in care achieving the level 2 threshold has **not been published since 2019** although the **latest dataset on StatsWales** has a provisional date of February 2024 for the release of the 2023 data. Senedd Research has used the historical data available on outcomes at key stage 4 and compared it to educational outcomes for all pupils, and for those pupils eligible for free school meals. The chart below from the **Statistical Briefing on Care Experienced Children 2024** shows the percentage of children achieving 5 GCSEs at grade A*-C, including maths and English or Welsh first language. Looked after children have lower educational attainment when compared to pupils eligible for free school meals and all pupils in 2017, 2018 and 2019.

Percentage of children achieving the level 2 threshold including English/Welsh and Mathematics at key stage 4



The CYPE report of May 2023 sets out that care experienced young people talked extensively about the importance of **school as a stabilising factor in their lives**. However, in the main, the Committee heard negative experiences, including children being regularly moved from school to school and that ‘LAC’ reviews were held in school time causing them embarrassment when social workers came in to meet them wearing ‘official’ badges.

The **Pupil Development Grant** (PDG) was extended to include Looked After Children in 2013-14. However, allocations for looked after children are paid to the regional consortia to use, rather than passported directly to schools, which is the method for the PDG for pupils eligible for free school meals.

4. The corporate parent and grandparent

Senedd scrutiny includes Petitions Committee's report March 2023
Supporting care experienced parents.

More than one child in every one-hundred in Wales is in care and has the 'state' acting as their parent. And numbers have significantly increased in the past ten years. The state is therefore responsible for where the child lives, their safety, their emotional well-being, their health, and their education. Welsh Government **guidance says** that "as corporate parents, each local authority **must** act for the children they look after as any responsible and conscientious parent would act".

When care experienced young people have their own children, the state effectively becomes a '**corporate grandparent**' and their experiences were examined by the Petitions Committee and are further discussed below.

4.1. "Is this good enough for my own child?"

The Welsh Government's **code of practice for looked after and accommodated children** sets out the duties of relevant public bodies. Referring to corporate parenting it says that "Once a child is in care all elected members and officers of the local authority, as corporate parents, need to be concerned about that child and must take the following principles into account when engaging with them and making any decision concerning them" including "**is this good enough for my own child?**".

A recent letter to the **Cross Party Group on Children in Our Care** set out further information on the Welsh Government's voluntary **Corporate Parenting Charter, called "A Promise from Wales"**, launched in September 2022. It said that "as of 2 January 2024, there are 25 Corporate Parents signed up to the Charter including Welsh Government and Welsh Ministers".

4.2. Giving children a stable home

Nearly three quarters (74% or 5,350) of children looked after had one placement during the year to 31 March 2023. This means that 26% of children looked after had two or more placements in the previous 12 months. Of those children, 1,190 (or 17% of all children looked after) had two placements and 670 (or 9%) had three or more placements.

Number of Placements during the year to March 2023



Source: StatsWales, [Children looked after at 31 March by local authority, number of placements during year and measure](#)

The CYPE Committee's report [If not now, then when? Radical reform for care experienced children and young people](#) said:

Often these moves were at very short notice, or no notice at all (one young woman told us that from an early age she always had a small rusk sack packed at the bottom of her bed with all her essentials in it – so that she could grab it and leave at a moment's notice), and sometimes far away geographically. In many cases changing foster placement involved moving schools and leaving newly established friendship groups. Young people, and the staff we spoke to, told us that this was really destabilising and distressing for them, especially as they had already experienced the trauma of being removed from their birth families.

The report also found that children were often placed far away from their home or previous placements because there were not any quality placements in their local area. This also meant using out of area placements that come at a much higher cost. Care Inspectorate Wales' (CIW) [Annual Report 2022-23](#) sets out the implication of this deficit saying:

This is leading local authorities to make arrangements, often at short notice, for children to be cared for in services which are not registered to provide care. These services are operating illegally and lack the safeguards that come with registration. This is particularly concerning when children are living in unregistered services having been deprived of their liberty by the court. Children subject to Deprivation of Liberty orders have complex needs and require high levels of skilled care and supervision. We recognise the significant lengths to which local authorities are going to, ensure they meet their statutory duty to provide care, support and accommodation for the children they are looking after.

4.3. Illegal placements and 'Deprivation of Liberty Orders'

In September 2023, the CYPE Committee [was told](#) by the then Deputy Minister for Social Services, Julie Morgan MS, that officials "will be undertaking an analysis exercise to establish the number of deprivation of liberty orders that have been used over the last 24 months", and that there were:

- six deprivation of liberty orders where young people are placed in unregistered placements “at the moment”, and:
- 30 care homes or children’s services operating without registration; 29 of these are operated by the local authorities and one is operated by a private provider.

Unregistered placements

Placing children in care into unregistered accommodation is illegal in England and Wales. ‘Unregistered accommodation’ is the term widely used to describe accommodation in which the provider delivers ‘care’ to a child under 18, but is not registered with CIW. Nevertheless, the CYPE Committee heard that there is an increasing number of children living in unregistered placements. In 2023, CIW **said that** these placements:

...do not have the safeguards in place that come with registration. It is often the case local authorities are directly operating these services, redeploying their own staff or using agency workers. Accommodation includes Air B&Bs which we have seen result in multiple moves for children from one premises to another. At times these placements have been outside of the child’s local area, and many are unable to meet their therapeutic and/or care needs. In each case CIW considers **if the threshold for criminal investigation and prosecution is met**, whilst recognising the local authority’s duty of care to the child.

In October 2023, CIW published its report on **Care homes for children operating without registration**. One of its findings was that “in Wales, unlike England, the majority of services operating without registration are being directly provided by local authorities themselves, not by independent sector providers”.

Deprivation of Liberty Orders

Children can be **deprived of their liberty** for welfare reasons or risks to their safety. The shortage, and a decrease, of available placements has meant that when a suitable secure placement cannot be found, the High Court can use its powers to deprive the child of their liberty through a **Deprivation of Liberty** order. Anecdotally, the CYPE Committee heard that this is particularly prevalent in North Wales (see judgement **and call “for the ‘scandal’ of children’s care in Wales to be wider known”**).

There has been **new Practice Guidance on the Court’s approach to unregistered placements** and recent changes to how courts deal with Deprivation of Liberty Orders due to the high volume of applications in respect of children.

The CYPE Committee has sought to establish how many children in Wales are deprived of their liberty and who has oversight of this, **recently being told** by CIW in March 2024:

...we don't have an overview of every child that's on a deprivation of liberty order, which is why we are now asking... providers have to notify us, we now are asking providers to notify us where a child is living in a children's home who has a deprivation of liberty order in place. That's very recent, so until that beds in we won't be able to report on it, but we hope we will be able to in future.

4.4. Supporting children in school

Previous sections of this brief include information on educational attainment, which shows that the academic achievement of care experienced children has historically been, and remains, significantly lower than pupils eligible for free school meals and 'all pupils'.

More broadly, in terms of the role that schools play, the CYPE Committee report of May 2023 sets out that care experienced young people talked extensively about the importance of **school as a stabilising factor in their lives**. However, in the main the Committee heard negative experiences about being regularly moved from school to school and that 'LAC' reviews were held in school time causing them embarrassment where social workers come in to meet them wearing badges.

4.5. Children's mental health

The CYPE Committee's May 2023 report said that many children come into care with post-traumatic stress and trauma, which often goes untreated due to the many challenges meeting the defined medical thresholds for specialist CAMHS. It said:

There was near universal agreement that current mental health services do not meet the needs of care experienced children and young people. We heard concerns and perceptions about long waiting lists... thresholds and criteria that don't recognise the trauma that care experienced young people have gone through... poor transitions from children's to adults' mental health services... and mis-labelling mental health issues as behavioural problems... We heard that mental health services for care experienced people are "dire" and that the system is "broken".

It went on to say:

We heard numerous and repeated calls from young people... organisations... and others... for care experienced children and young people to have a right to therapeutic support.

The Welsh Government **rejected** the Committee's subsequent recommendation that:

As part of umbrella reforms to corporate parenting... the Welsh Government should introduce **legislation to give all care experienced children the right to a specialist therapeutic mental health support service**. They should have a statutory right to have their needs assessed at intervals and to have those needs met. That service should be available from the point at which they are removed from their birth parents to at least the point at which they cease to be defined as a care leaver. It should be separate and independent from existing mental health services, and specialise in trauma-informed mental health support.

4.6. Being a 'corporate grandparent'

The CYPE Committee **report refers to a** "cycle of care", saying it was "appalled" that around a quarter of young people who have been in care will go on to have at least one of their own children removed by the state. This followed detailed scrutiny of this issue by the **Petitions Committee** referred to earlier in this brief and the report: "Uncomfortable listening": Petitions Committee report on care experienced parents

5. Workforce challenges, financial pressures and data

Senedd scrutiny includes the Fifth Senedd Public Accounts Committee report on **Care Experienced Children** (November 2018) and Sixth Senedd CYPE Committee report **Services for care experienced children: exploring radical reform**.

5.1. Workforce

Children's social work vacancies

During its inquiry into **radical reform** the CYPE Committee referred to a “very concerning picture about the challenges facing the children's services workforce”. Including that **vacancies** have risen 38% in the year from 2021 to 2022 – meaning at the time of taking evidence there were **639 vacancies in children's social work teams across Wales**. We also know that:

- In March 2024, latest data showed that **11.5% of all social workers** (children and adults' social workers) work for an agency; and
- In September 2023, **17.5% of children's services social workers** work for an agency.

Data is routinely collected and published about the children's social care workforce in England, but the same data is not available in Wales.

Caseloads

The Association of Directors of Social Services **told the CYPE Committee**: “The most radical reform that could be realised in this area is a **reduction in workload for our social workers**”. The CYPE Committee's subsequent report said that “the majority of young people and many third sector professionals were in favour of legislation that placed a cap on the caseloads of social workers” explaining that:

Overwhelmingly, we heard that children's services social workers' caseloads are too high. Care experienced young people told us time and time again that they struggled to get the support they needed from their social workers because high caseloads meant that they weren't able to spend enough time with each individual child or young person.

It recommended legislating to place a duty on local authorities to calculate maximum safe caseloads for children's services social workers, and to take all

reasonable steps to maintain those maximum caseloads for all children's social workers. The Welsh Government **rejected** this recommendation.

Staff turnover

One of the most fundamental things the CYPE Committee reported on during its 'radical reform' inquiry was about the huge disruption and upset that children, young people and families experience when they have **frequent changes of social workers**, partially caused by staff turnover. Practitioners from other agencies also told the Committee that staff turnover causes huge problems. Foster carers in Wales said that continuity in, and the capacity of, social work staff was the one thing they would most like to change to make foster care better.

The recent **Joint Review of Child Protection Arrangements (JICPA) for Powys** (October 2023) says:

In common with many areas across Wales, the ability to recruit and retain key staff is impacting on children's safeguarding arrangements. This is exacerbated by the high demand on services and the increasing complexity of children and families' needs.

The 2023 **JICPA for Bridgend** also says:

In common with many areas across Wales, recruitment and retention of key staff is impacting on children's safeguarding arrangements. This is exacerbated by high levels of demand and increasing complexity of children's and families' needs. The workforce position within social services remains fragile. Deficits in the number of social workers and a competitive market has resulted in an increased reliance on agency social workers.

Part of the solution, according to the CYPE Committee, was for a new law to calculate maximum caseloads for children's social workers. It also said the Welsh Government should develop a new law alongside a comprehensive workforce sufficiency plan. The Welsh Government **rejected** both these recommendations.

5.2. Financial pressures on children's services

The majority of public expenditure on children's social care, safeguarding and care experience is from the Revenue Support Grant, the largest single source of revenue funding for local authorities and which sits in the Local Government portfolio, overseen by the Cabinet Secretary for Housing, Local Government and Planning. However, the responsibility for outcomes for this group of children sits with the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, and the Minister for Social Care. There are also some specific grants in the Health and Social Services Major Expenditure

Group such as the Sustainable Social Services Grant and the Looked After Children Grant.

A Welsh council leader **warned in November 2023** that it’s “only a matter of time” before a Welsh local authority goes ‘bankrupt’. The WLGAs recent **written evidence to the Senedd Finance Committee** (jointly with the Association of Directors of Social Services) referred to 2023-24 and said that £41 million of that year’s £219 million overspend is directly from existing funding pressures in children’s social care. It also refers to the continuing rise in the numbers of children needing care and sets out this breakdown of financial pressures on social services for 2023-24:

Current year pressures	2023-24
	£000s
Pay inflation pressures	5,281
Non pay inflation pressures	3,866
Commissioning cost pressures	13,201
Demand related pressures - Adults	45,683
Demand related pressures - Children’s	40,730
Overall Total	£108,761

Source: WLGA/SWT Survey September 2023

The WLGA says that children’s residential placements account for over £26 million of the total financial pressures for 2023-24 and goes on to say the following:

...Weekly costs in excess of £20,000 per week for placements were identified and one local authority reported that their children’s services budget has increased by £11m (56%) over the last 3 years, with specialist placement costs increasing by £6.6m (44%) over the same period.

Another highlights that despite a £9.5m budget build into their placements budget for 23/24 (17% equivalent), in month 6 the council was still recording an £8.5m budget overspend, primarily due to the cost of residential placements. Here placements made during the year are

proving more costly than historic placements. Factoring in fee uplifts and price differentials in new placements, residential placements price inflation from 1 April 2023 to 31 September 2023 was 9%, at a cost of £2m to this particular council.

5.3. Data

The updated **Statistical Briefing on Care Experienced Children 2024** sets out that both the CYPE Committee report, **If not now, then when? Radical reform for care experienced children and young people**, and the Petitions Committee report, **Supporting care experienced parents**, raised concerns about the availability of data about care experienced children. Chapter 2 of the CYPE report (pages 49-54) set out its findings about data collection and said:

The lack of robust data collected about various aspects of the care system, its workforce, and children with care experience has been a consistent theme across our evidence gathering.

The report lists what it refers to as the “most significant gaps in published data” (pages 50-52) and suggests “much of this data is routinely published and collected in England”. The report also references the pages 14-15 of the 2019 Wales Centre for Public Policy report, **Analysis of Factors Contributing to High Rates of Care**. It includes a table of comparative data about looked after children which is collected and published across the UK.

6. Child Poverty

Senedd scrutiny includes the Equality and Social Justice Committee's report **Calling time on child poverty: how Wales can do better** (November 2023).

The new First Minister's manifesto says he is determined that "we will give **all children in Wales a strong start**, no matter their background", and that the Welsh Government will continue to tackle child poverty. He says the Welsh Government will "renew our focus on the first 1000 days of a child's life".

Announcing the Welsh Government's priorities on 16 April, the First Minister **said that:**

...the fight to lift children out of poverty will be at the heart of this Welsh Government's mission. No childhood should begin blighted by poverty. We will do everything we can in making sure that children can grow up feeling happy and hopeful for their future.

6.1. Child poverty statistics

A child is considered to be in relative poverty if the income of the household they live in falls below 60% of the UK median (the middle value in a list of numbers that have been arranged from smallest to largest). This is the most commonly used measure of child poverty. The **latest figures published by the UK Government** show that, after housing costs have been taken into account:

- Over the 2020-21 to 2022-23 period, 29% of children living in Wales were in relative income poverty, slightly lower than the UK figure of 30%.
- In 2020-21 to 2022-23, the percentage of children living in Wales that were living in relative income poverty was lower than in six of the nine English regions, but higher than in Scotland and Northern Ireland.
- Children have consistently been the age group **most likely to be in poverty** throughout devolution, as has been the case for the other UK nations.

6.2. Welsh Government's Child Poverty Strategy

On 23 January, the Welsh Government published its **Child Poverty Strategy**. This "sets the direction for Welsh Government actions to tackle child poverty over the next decade or more". The strategy has five objectives:

- to reduce costs and maximise the incomes of families.
- to create pathways out of poverty so that children and young people and their families have opportunities to realise their potential.
- to support child and family wellbeing and make sure that work across Welsh Government delivers for children living in poverty, including those with protected characteristics, so that they can enjoy their rights and have better outcomes.
- to ensure children, young people and their families are treated with dignity and respect by the people and services who interact with and support them and to challenge the stigma of poverty.
- to ensure that effective cross -government working at the national level enables strong collaboration at the regional and local level.

When scrutinising the Welsh Government's **Draft Child Poverty Strategy**, the Senedd's **Equality and Social Justice Committee heard calls** from a range of stakeholders, including the Children's Commissioner, the Bevan Foundation, Dr Rhian Croke of the Observatory on Human Rights of Children, and attendees at its stakeholder session. They called **for the Welsh Government to take a much more ambitious approach to tackling child poverty**. For example, **the Bevan Foundation said** that there needs to be a move towards eradicating poverty and focusing efforts on those at greatest risk of child poverty. While the Children's Commissioner **described the** Welsh Government's approach as being too downbeat, saying that:

...it just doesn't sound to children and young people like we really have much faith in our own ability to even deliver the aspirations that are in the strategy; it sounds like a very defeatist approach, where we're focusing more on what we can't do and why.

As mentioned above, the new First Minister has said that the Welsh Government will "renew our focus on the first 10,000 days of a child's life". Public Health Wales **highlights there** is "strong international evidence indicating that the first 1000 days - during pregnancy and up to a child's second birthday - is a critical time". **It argues that attempts to reduce inequalities "must start as early as possible to have the best... chance of succeeding"**. However, **the Royal College of Physicians concluded** that there has been insufficient focus on the first 1,000 days of a child's life in the Welsh Government's Draft Child Poverty Strategy and called for the impact of poverty on babies and toddlers to "be considered in far more detail".

6.3. Targets and monitoring

The Welsh Government previously had a target in place to eradicate child poverty by 2020, however it **dropped this target in 2016**, saying that:

Our ambition to eradicate child poverty (defined in terms of the relative income measure) by 2020 depended heavily on wider UK economic circumstances and we recognise that we are not now going to be able to achieve this.

During the Equality and Social Justice Committee's **inquiry into child poverty**, a key theme emerging from the Committee's evidence was **the need for the Welsh Government to introduce targets to focus attention on reducing child poverty**, with there being "deep unease" among organisations about the absence of targets in the Draft Child Poverty Strategy. Chris Birt, Associate Director for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in Scotland, **told the committee** that he considers that the introduction of child poverty targets in Scotland "forced the Scottish Government's hand in recent years to take significant actions like the Scottish child payment" to tackle child poverty. He said that having a limited number of targets helps governments to prioritise and can "help to focus people's minds".

The Committee recommended that the Welsh Government set interim and longer-term targets for reducing child poverty, learning from the approaches taken in other countries such as Scotland and New Zealand. These should aim for ambitious and realistic reductions for children in relative poverty, absolute poverty, material deprivation and persistent poverty.

The Welsh Government **has decided to adopt a different approach**. It considers that the most effective way to implement targets is "through a co-ordinated approach across every level where relevant powers are held". The Welsh Government has opted instead to develop a framework based on a range of measures, **seeking independent research advice from Professor Rod Hick** to take this forward.

Coinciding with the publication of the Child Poverty Strategy in January 2024, the Children's Commissioner and 13 other children's rights organisations **set out their concerns** about the Welsh Government's proposed approach:

As children's rights organisations, many of whom were also members of the Government's External Reference group for the strategy, we are deeply disappointed that Ministers have not listened to our calls for a robust action plan with measurable targets...

We've been promised a monitoring framework, but we've not been given any indication of when this will be in operation or what it will include. Until then, we will not be able to determine whether public money being spent in Wales is reaching those children, whose lives are being so severely affected.