

Supporting care experienced parents

P-06-1161 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

March 2023



The Welsh Parliament is the democratically elected body that represents the interests of Wales and its people. Commonly known as the Senedd, it makes laws for Wales, agrees Welsh taxes and holds the Welsh Government to account.

An electronic copy of this document can be found on the Senedd website:
www.senedd.wales/SeneddPetitions

Copies of this document can also be obtained in accessible formats including Braille, large print, audio or hard copy from:

Petitions Committee
Welsh Parliament
Cardiff Bay
CF99 1SN

Tel: **0300 200 6565**
Email: **Petitions@senedd.wales**
Twitter: **[@SeneddPetitions](https://twitter.com/SeneddPetitions)**

© Senedd Commission Copyright 2023

The text of this document may be reproduced free of charge in any format or medium providing that it is reproduced accurately and not used in a misleading or derogatory context. The material must be acknowledged as copyright of the Senedd Commission and the title of the document specified.

Supporting care experienced parents

P-06-1161 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

March 2023



About the Committee

The Committee was established on 23 June 2021. Its remit can be found at:
www.senedd.wales/SeneddPetitions

Current Committee membership:



**Committee Chair:
Jack Sargeant MS**
Welsh Labour



Rhys ab Owen MS
Independent Plaid Cymru
Member



Luke Fletcher MS
Plaid Cymru



Joel James MS
Welsh Conservatives



Buffy Williams MS
Welsh Labour

The following Members attended as substitutes during this inquiry.



James Evans MS
Welsh Conservatives



Heledd Fychan MS
Plaid Cymru

Contents

The Petition	5
Chair’s foreword	6
Recommendations	8
1. Background	9
2. Language and context	11
Language	11
What is a parent and child placement?	11
Care experienced parents	12
Data collection and publication	13
3. Care experienced parents’ voices	14
Stigma	14
Relationship with corporate parents	16
Emotional Trauma	17
Support	18
Lack of support	18
What would help?	19
4. Research and data	20
5. Service providers - working with families	23
An increased risk of compulsory interventions from children’s services?	23
Timely and bespoke support services	26
Support networks	28
Advocacy	29
Local authority challenges	30

Evidence and outcomes.....	33
6. Conclusion	35
Annex 1: Engagement with care experienced parents	37
Annex 2: List of oral evidence sessions.....	45
Annex 3: List of written evidence	46

The Petition

This inquiry began with the following petition. The Committee agreed to broaden its inquiry in order to consider the wider journey of care experienced parents.

P-06-1161 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

We believe that many care leavers walk out of their placements because little thought is given to their previous experiences or to their mental wellbeing even though a baby has the right to stay with its parent/s if it is safe to do so.

Many care leavers have social services intervention, when they give birth. This is often due to their history and/or lack of their own parental guidance. These care leavers will undoubtedly have experienced trauma in their childhoods and often suffer from anxiety into their adult lives. They have often never felt safe in their homes as a child and having their own space has been their only safe haven where they are totally relaxed. Currently, if there is any concern, a parent is taken away from their home, family and friends then placed in a foster home or residential home to be assessed with little thought to the parents triggers and mental wellbeing. We believe that this often causes a roller coaster of emotions and parents then walk away from placements only to forever regret a rash decision made in a moment of anxiety that wouldn't have happened if the situation had been dealt with more empathically. We want to fact find to see if a better solution for parent and child is needed.

Chair's foreword

Becoming a parent and taking responsibility for the wellbeing of another human being, is an enormous, life-changing event. It can feel overwhelming, even in the most positive circumstances.

Considering this petition – which seeks to improve data collection in order to improve outcomes – we wanted to learn more about what that experience is like for people who have experienced care in their own childhoods. The evidence we received made for uncomfortable listening. We heard of prejudice and pre-judgement, and harrowing tales of individuals struggling to build better lives for themselves and their loved ones.

But we also heard more hopeful tales: of services that are providing the support people need; and of individuals overcoming considerable challenges to follow their journey as parents.

As a committee we are grateful to everyone who gave evidence to this inquiry. As much as we try to put people at their ease, appearing before a Senedd Committee can be a stressful and intimidating experience. But I'm particularly grateful to those care-experienced parents who shared deeply personal stories, not to help themselves; but purely so that others would not have to go through their experiences.

During our sessions I read from a letter¹ written by Jennifer Molloy. She wrote.

"I hope through sharing my experience and being involved in this research, I can help bring about a different experience for others.

I hope this is the start of something better."

Based on what we heard, we are recommending a series of steps that the Government can take, which we think will make a big difference. I hope the Welsh Government, local authorities and other stakeholders will be able to act on

¹ The letter is published in Louise Roberts's book -The Children of Looked After Children: Outcomes, Experiences and Ensuring Meaningful Support to Young Parents In and Leaving Care, 2021.

what we have heard. And that care experienced children in Wales will get the support they need to become the parents they aspire to be.

If we can achieve this, then this inquiry will indeed be the start of something better.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "JACK SARGEANT." The signature is written in a cursive style. A horizontal line with an arrowhead at the right end is drawn across the bottom of the signature.

Jack Sargeant

Chair, Petitions Committee

Recommendations

Recommendation 1. The Welsh Government should mandate the adoption and monitoring of the corporate parenting good practice charter co-produced by CASCADE and care experienced parents and organisations which support them. All Heads of Social Services have expressed their support for this charter, and it would be a positive step forward for each local authority and other public bodies to adopt the charter to demonstrate their commitment to provide holistic support to care experienced parents.

Recommendation 2. The Welsh Government should ensure that data is routinely collected in relation to how many young people in care or who have left care (up to the age of 21) become pregnant, and how many of their children remain with their parent/s, placed in foster care or with family members or placed for adoption. Learning about the outcomes for families is important to inform our understanding in order to further develop support systems and plan services accordingly. In the interim we welcome the Deputy Minister for Social Services' offer to undertake a snapshot survey of experienced care parents across all local authorities.

Recommendation 3. The Welsh Government should continue to support edge of care multi-agency services such as Baby and Me, Jig-So and Reflect which are making a difference in supporting vulnerable parents through trauma informed and strength-based approaches. There should be similar services available throughout Wales.

Recommendation 4. The Welsh Government should update legislation to ensure all care experienced parents have a statutory right to an intensive, wrap around preventative support service to keep families together regardless of how recent their care experience. It should include specialist parental advocacy to navigate the social care and family courts systems and be modelled on evidence-based services such as Project Unity.

Recommendation 5. The Welsh Government should ensure that every care experienced parent has suitable housing provision. Lack of appropriate housing within their community has a significant impact on keeping families together.

Recommendation 6. The Children, Young People and Education Committee should regularly monitor progress against the Programme for Government Commitment to improve children's social care.

1. Background

This chapter details the journey of the petition, and the work of the committee to explore how to take the petition forward.

- 1.** The petition calls 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 petitioner is a foster carer who is concerned about how care experienced parents are supported. She describes the difficult and painful experience of a young mother who was placed in a foster placement with her baby for a three-month assessment. She believes that the current system fails to recognise the trauma care experienced mothers have faced and the anxiety resulting from social services intervention. The petition calls for the data to be collected and considered in order to increase understanding of how best to support care experienced young people when they become parents.
- 2.** During our first consideration of the petition on 16 July 2021 we agreed to write to the Children’s Commissioner for Wales. Her response recognised the many challenges involved, including the dual role for local authorities of safeguarding a baby if there are concerns whilst supporting the parent. The Children’s Commissioner states that research shows that care experienced young people who become parents are often over-represented in care and child protection proceedings. The evidence also highlights the complex needs of care experienced parents and the breadth of support that they may require. The Children’s Commissioner states that “the lack of data and understanding of the rates of intervention and outcomes for parents and their children is contributing to underdeveloped responses to this important area of service provision.”²
- 3.** Based on her recommendations to seek further evidence, the feedback from the petitioner and a scoping paper from the Senedd Research Service we agreed to broaden the scope of the inquiry. We decided to take direct evidence from care experienced parents, local authorities and third sector organisations who support young parents and invite academics from CASCADE to present their research findings in this area. The purpose of receiving evidence was to understand:

² [Correspondence from the Children’s Commissioner for Wales](#), 03 September 2021

- Young people's experiences of having a child whilst in care themselves or as a care leaver;
- Whether young care experienced parents feel supported and are provided good quality practical and emotional support, and guidance;
- What services and support are provided by local authorities, third sector or others and whether they meet young people and their children's needs;
- What data is collected in relation to children in care or care leavers who have children, and data about child protection interventions or care proceedings regarding the children/parents.
- What data would be useful to inform service planning.

4. We took oral evidence from a care experienced parent, Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre at Cardiff University, National Youth Advocacy Service, Barnardo's, Local Authorities and Voices from Care Cymru, concluding with the Deputy Minister for Social Services. Full details of the oral evidence can be found in Annex 2.

5. Written evidence was received from local authorities, Voices from Care Cymru, the Jig-so Project and the Deputy Minister for Social Services. Full details of the written evidence can be found in Annex 3.

6. Our Citizen Engagement Team also met with and listened to care experienced parents from across Wales facilitated by the National Youth Advocacy Service. Committee Members met with care experienced parents who are supported by Voices from Care Cymru. The parents' experiences are central to this report and their voices are reflected throughout. Full details of engagement with care experienced parents can be found in Annex 1.

7. We would like to thank all those who contributed to our inquiry, especially every care experienced parent who took the time to contribute to this inquiry and shared details of very personal and often painful experiences.

2. Language and context

Understanding what we mean when we say care experienced parents and the challenges faced by these young people is essential. It is within this context they face the new and often overwhelming responsibility of becoming a parent.

Language

8. The petition refers to parents who themselves have been looked after by a local authority as children, who in turn go on to have social services interventions when they have their own children. 'Looked after' is the legal term for children who are being cared for by the local authority in a range of settings. If they meet certain criteria at a specified age, they become entitled to longer term support, up until the age of 25 in certain circumstances and are legally defined as 'care leavers'. This terminology is reflected in the Welsh Government's published statistics. Many people prefer the term 'care experienced' when referring to these two groups of children and young people. Where possible, our report uses 'care experienced' to reflect the wording of the petition.

What is a parent and child placement?

9. Local authorities sometimes place a child and a parent together into a time limited placement, in most cases to enable them to remain together while a parenting assessment and / or court proceedings are taking place. These placements are usually used for babies rather than older children and can be either as a foster placement or a residential placement, for example in a specialist parent and child unit. They can either be local authority placements or run by private providers. Parenting capacity is a significant focus of the Framework for the Assessment of Children and their Families as set out in the Code of practice for assessing the needs of individuals issued under Section 145 of the **Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014**.

Care experienced parents

10. What happens to care experienced young people when they become parents is subject of several reports and research projects such as the children of 'looked after' children study.³ Of the eight care experienced parents from Wales interviewed, 16 of their children were discussed and 12 of those children were 'looked after' or adopted.

11. The Wales care-leavers and their children placed for adoption study⁴ found that:

"Young people in and leaving state care are more likely than the general population to become parents at a young age. Relatively little is known about the experiences and progress of care leaver parents and their children, but emerging evidence suggests an increased risk of intergenerational state intervention."

12. It drew on data from the Wales Adoption Study and found that "more than a quarter (27%) of birth mothers and a fifth (19%) of birth fathers with children placed for adoption were themselves care leavers".

13. It also referred to care experienced parents being distinguishable from other birth parents by their own experiences of abuse and neglect, going on to say:

"Care leaver birth mothers were also more likely than their non-care leaver counterparts to have diagnosed mental health problems and were less likely to appeal the adoption plan. The profiles of children placed for adoption between care leaver and non-care leaver birth parents were similar."

14. A Nuffield Foundation study⁵ in England found that a high number of women who repeatedly appear before family courts and whose children are subsequently removed into public care or adoption have themselves been in care.

³ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/cfs.12344>

⁴ <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/101512/>

⁵ www.nuffieldfoundation.org/news/study-reveals-link-between-childhood-in-care-and-mums-who-have-babies-removed-by-the-courts

15. Court records showed that 40% of a sample of 354 mothers in repeat proceedings had been in foster care or children's homes themselves with a further 14% living in private or informal relationships away from their parents.

Data collection and publication

16. Data on the number of 'babies/children return to their care experienced parents care at the end of a Parent and Child Placement', as referred to in the petition, is not published. There may be a number of agencies involved but primarily Local Authorities and Cafcass. There is a range of data about care experienced children that is collected from local authorities and subsequently published by the Welsh Government.⁶ Cafcass Cymru supports children and families in family court proceedings, advising the courts on the best course of action on what it considers to be in the best interests of individual children. The statistics it publishes are in its latest Annual Report 2019-20.⁷

⁶ <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Health-and-Social-Care/Social-Services/Childrens-Services/Children-Looked-After>

⁷ <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2020-12/Cafcass-cymru-annual-report-2019-2020.pdf>

3. Care experienced parents' voices

This chapter sets out the challenges faced by young people in their own words, either in focus groups, or evidence sessions.

17. During this inquiry we listened to young people's challenging and often painful experiences of pregnancy and becoming parents whilst in care or as care leavers. Jennifer Molloy, a care experienced parent who now raises two of her five children, shared her experiences with us. Having grown up in the care of the local authority, Jennifer became pregnant when seventeen years old.

"I was homeless, subject to a care order and the local authority were focusing on my child, not me, even though I was technically a looked-after child."⁸

Jennifer Molloy, care experienced parent

18. The Citizen Engagement Team also engaged with 24 care experienced parents across Wales, including 20 females and 4 males through facilitated face-to-face focus groups in partnership with National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS) Cymru and Voices from Care Cymru. Members joined one discussion group. Further detail can be found in Annex 1.

19. Whilst each individual had nuanced personal stories, some clear overarching themes emerged.

Stigma

20. It is clear that care experienced parents feel they face a high level of stigma due to their past experiences. This led to frustrations from the participants who believe this 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."

⁸ [Petitions Committee, Record of proceedings, 21 March 2022, para 26](#)

Care experienced parent

“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.”

Care experienced parent

21. 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?”

Care experienced parent

22. Whilst the majority of frustrations were directed towards social services, there were also several concerns raised around the negative attitudes from health professionals and education.

“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.”

Care experienced parent

23. We heard how one mother continues to feel this stigma although she’s now a parent in her thirties.

“I think there’s very much stigma related in social services, education and health when it comes to you being in care.”⁹

Jennifer Molloy, care experienced parent

⁹ [Petitions Committee, Record of proceedings, 21 March 2022, para 44](#)

24. Focus group participants expressed concern that this can result in pregnant young people or new parents fearful of seeking advice or support.

Relationship with corporate parents

25. Another key theme that emerged from the focus groups was the negative relationships care experienced parents had with social services.

“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.”

Care experienced parent

26. Whilst there were a few examples of positive stories emerging with individual social workers, they mostly felt that social services did not provide the practical and emotional support they needed. There were several examples shared which highlight a lack of trust and the impact this had.

“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.”

Care experienced parents

27. Similarly, many of the care experienced parents were unhappy with their experiences of foster care and several reflected that foster care and social services were not 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.’”

Care experienced parent

Emotional Trauma

28. It is not surprising to hear care experienced young people talking about the trauma they've experienced in their lives. Sadly, we heard how this was exacerbated by their care experiences and in particular the emotional turmoil, distress and grief felt when their child or children were removed from their care.

"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."

Care experienced parent

"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."

Care experienced parent

29. The young people shared how their experiences have resulted in deteriorating mental health and how they have struggle to manage this.

"Ultimately - these are life and death issues we are dealing with- it can and has pushed young people to suicide."

Care experienced parent

"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."

Care experienced parent

Support

30. All participants commented on the invaluable emotional and practical support given to them by the third-sector.

“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.”

Care experienced parents

“Barnardo’s were great in giving me whole person support.”

Care experienced parent

“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.”

Care experienced parent

Lack of support

31. Describing her traumatic experience which resulted in two of her children being adopted and one placed in foster care, Jennifer Molloy highlighted the additional practical and emotional challenges faced by care experienced parents including insufficient support and guidance around sexual health and healthy relationships and failure to provide suitable accommodation.

32. Focus group participants highlighted similar experiences of a lack of support which met their needs.

What would help?

33. The focus group participants suggested improvements which would have improved their journey. These included more emotional support, prevention, improved communication between agencies and fundamental changes to the social care system.

34. Several participants noted how there was a clear need for more emotional support and to fund services to enable them to provide such 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.”

Care experienced parent

35. Prevention was emphasised as essential to break the cycle of future generations of children being taken into care from their care experienced parents.

“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.”

Care experienced parents

36. The young people felt that poor communication hindered how they were supported, access to services, contact arrangements and social work visits, for example. They believe that communication within and between agencies must be improved.

4. Research and data

This chapter sets out some findings from academic studies

37. Dr Louise Roberts, Senior Lecturer at Cardiff University and part of CASCADE, the Children’s Social Care Research and Development Centre, provided an overview of the five-year research study undertaken between 2014-2019 exploring the challenges faced by care experienced parents.

38. The initial research idea came from young people, connected with Voices from Care, concerned about too many instances where young people starting families felt ‘inadequately supported and experiencing compulsory children’s services interventions’ and felt it would be useful to explore this further.¹⁰

39. There were several phases to the research which included interviews with care experienced parents and with professionals. The research engaged with local authority Leaving Care Services to capture a snapshot of care experienced parents at a point in time. This was needed as data in relation to how many care experienced parents there are at any one time or every year is not collected and neither is there available data in terms of outcomes for parents and children.

40. The research found some “concerning evidence in respect of outcomes and levels of parent and child separation.”¹¹ The secondary analysis of existing national data sets, including the Wales adoption study, revealed that one in four birth mothers were recorded as care leavers, and one in five birth fathers. The snapshot of care experienced parents undertaken “identified 258 parents, 238 children and 44 ongoing pregnancies.” The data shows that 26 per cent of children were separated from both biological parents. However, without routinely collected data, it’s not easy to decipher what the figures means.¹²

41. The experiences and perspectives of professionals and of parents were explored. It found evidence of stigma, discrimination and disadvantage where professionals had a “propensity to question the influence of parents’ experiences, both before care and in care, on their ability to be parents.”¹³ For example there

¹⁰ [Petitions Committee. Record of proceedings. 21 March 2022. paragraph 14](#)

¹¹ [Petitions Committee. Record of proceedings. 21 March 2022. paragraph 18](#)

¹² [Petitions Committee. Record of proceedings. 21 March 2022. paragraph 18](#)

¹³ [Petitions Committee. record of proceedings. 21 March 2022. paragraph 19](#)

was evidence of the routine referral of parents to children's services for parenting assessments.

42. The research identified that support for pregnant young people or care experienced parents were underdeveloped and variable across Wales, although Dr Roberts recognises that there have since been some developments in this area. It was also evident that emphasis was placed on the importance of parents accessing informal sources of support such as birth family members, former foster carers, or partners. For many young people who have been in care, these informal support networks are limited, and whilst having someone to rely on was considered very important, success in parenting without such support was seen as much more challenging. Dr Roberts shared that "it was generally accepted that support available from corporate parents was a really poor substitute for what you'd ordinarily expect to be available from birth families."¹⁴ The research found evidence of parents' multiple needs, including practical, relational, emotional and financial needs.

43. Dr Roberts shared the positive and collaborative work undertaken to develop corporate parenting support including developing a good practice charter. This was co-produced with care experienced parents and through engagement with professionals in the statutory sector and third sector. The charter provides a clear commitment to providing holistic support before and during pregnancy and when young people become parents.¹⁵ The aim is that every local authority can formally commit to the charter, which is supported by Welsh Government, the Children's Commissioner and Social Care Wales.

44. Care experienced parents and young people have been central to the research throughout and we heard from Jennifer Molloy who has been actively involved. Her powerful letter ends Dr Roberts book *The Children of Looked After Children* detailing this research. We are grateful to Jennifer who reflected on her experiences of becoming pregnant whilst in care, as a care leaver and beyond. Many of the experiences shared resonated with what other care experienced parents told us, including experiences of stigma and discrimination, lack of suitable housing and a fear of informing health professionals about a pregnancy and the resulting children's services involvement. Jennifer also highlighted the devastating loss experienced when a child is removed from their parent, and the impact and barriers this can have on future involvement.

¹⁴ [Petitions Committee. Record of proceedings, 21 March 2022, paragraph 20.](#)

¹⁵ www.exchangewales.org/supporting-parents-in-and-leaving-care-messagestocorporateparents/

“... when you’re going through parenting assessments, it’s advised that you get everything ready ... so have a pram, have a cot and a bedroom set up, which I think is unnecessary, if they don’t know the outcome of an assessment ... because then you’re left with a room that’s very upsetting and distressing to see ... So, sometimes, that can be a barrier, trying to just complete the assessment.”¹⁶

Jennifer Molloy, care experienced parent

45. In seeking to improve outcomes for care experienced parents Dr Roberts called for support from the Welsh Government to implement the good practice charter, for the routine collection of data in terms of care experienced parents and outcomes for families, for the legislation to be explicit that young people need support when they become parents and that third sector support services continue to be developed and funded.¹⁷

¹⁶ [Petitions Committee. Record of proceedings. 21 March 2022. paragraph 21](#)

¹⁷ [Petitions Committee. Record of proceedings. 21 March 2022. paragraphs 61-64](#)

5. Service providers – working with families

This evidence captures what we heard from the individuals and organisations supporting care experienced parents.

46. We took oral and written evidence from a range of service providers including local authorities and third sector organisations working with care experienced parents exploring key themes highlighted by research and young people.

An increased risk of compulsory interventions from children’s services?

47. Whilst all of the evidence received reflects the many challenges and complexities involved when care experienced young people become pregnant, there are differing views on whether children’s services interventions are always proportionate. Young people have told us that they feel stigmatised because of their care history whilst recognising that they need bespoke and sensitive support.

48. Mark Carter, Assistant Director for Children’s Services, Barnardo’s, shared that within the Baby and Me service in Newport, pregnant care experienced young people are:

“...certainly disproportionately represented within our referrals that we receive—it’s just under half of our referrals. And then two thirds of our referrals are recurrent care proceedings, where families have had previous children removed. Really, I think what we find with care experienced young people is that the range of difficulties, complexities and trauma that they’ve experienced throughout their childhoods isn’t necessarily taken into consideration.”¹⁸

49. He explained how important it is to provide a bespoke and intensive package of support to ensure both the baby and parent/s are well supported and that a thorough assessment of their needs and abilities to parent is undertaken.¹⁹

¹⁸ [Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 21 March 2022, paragraph 88](#)

¹⁹ [Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 21 March 2022, paragraph 89](#)

50. Liz Baker, Assistant Director for Children’s Services, Barnardo’s emphasised the importance of the trauma-informed framework being developed which recognises the adverse childhood experiences and repeat trauma experienced. She noted that the response received from professionals doesn’t always sufficiently acknowledge this and therefore young people are judged on their behaviours or inability to respond to request by professionals. She advocates utilising a strength-based approach which takes account of their experiences.²⁰

51. As a result of increasing advocacy cases supporting young women who are care experienced and pregnant, the National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS), established project Unity with Welsh Government grant funding. Their CEO Sharon Lovell explained that the project works exclusively with young women who are care experienced, whose children are either at risk of being on the child protection register or involved in care proceedings. Since April 2020,

“worked with 108 young women whose children have all been subjected to child protection proceedings. I think that evidence alone suggests that the children who are born to care experienced young women are stigmatised much more than non-care experienced young people”²¹

Sharon Lovell, NYAS

52. Voices from Care Cymru shared that care experienced young parents have said they feel stigmatised because of their care history, citing an example of a professional “making comparisons between the care experienced parent and their parent, which causes further distress.”²² Their CEO Deborah Jones believes that their work with young people demonstrates that they are more likely to have social services interventions than their peers. Reflecting on the meeting with young people supported by Voices from Care, Buffy Williams shared that some of their stories were alarming, and they felt they’d failed as parents even before their first contact with a health professional.

²⁰ [Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 21 March 2022, paragraph 92](#)

²¹ [Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 21 March 2022, paragraph 94](#)

²² [Petitions Committee, Record of proceedings, 25 April 2022, paragraph 143](#)

"I felt like I could've just given my child over as soon as I'd given birth, because there was no point in even trying."

Care experienced parent

53. In her role as the Chair of all-Wales Heads of Children's Services, Annabel Lloyd emphasised that keeping families together is at the heart of their work and that they aim to provide "services that are available at the right time, and in the right way, that are trauma-informed and evidence based, rooted in strength-based practice."²³ Providing assurances that when pre-birth assessments are carried out they don't necessarily identify the care experience of a parent or an expecting parent but emphasised the importance of supporting care leavers whilst recognising their complex backgrounds. She conveyed that "a decision to separate parent and child is an awesome intervention in the life of a family—a decision that we would never make before we have considered and reconsidered and looked at all options for alternatives. It is very much a last resort."²⁴ Any such decision would not be made in isolation and would entail working with other agencies including health and the judiciary.

54. The local authorities also emphasised that many care experienced parents, in particular those over 21, have no children's services involvement during pregnancy or in their family life. It was noted that intervention is more likely to occur when the parents are very young, under 21 years of age, and in need of support. Whilst acknowledging the negative experiences highlighted by young people and research, they emphasised the work that has taken place and is continuing, to develop trauma-informed, strength-based practices to support young parents. These include services such as Baby and Me in Newport, Jig-So in Swansea, Baby in Mind in Bridgend, and Magu, which is a service in development in Rhondda Cynon Taf. However, it was noted that there are differences in what is available across Wales.

55. Julie Davies, Head of Children and Family Services provided a snap shot data from the City and County of Swansea setting out information about 380 care experienced young people in touch with the local authority as of March 2022. It suggests that of these, 21 were parents and 14 had their children remaining living with them. From the cohort of care experienced parents, 5 were under 18 years of age at the point of birth (the youngest being 15) and 16 were aged 18-22 years.²⁵

²³ [Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 21 March 2022, paragraph 12 & 13](#)

²⁴ [Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 25 April 2022, paragraph 15](#)

²⁵ [Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 25 April 2022, paragraph 20](#)

This appears to suggest that a third of care experienced parents had their children removed. Although work was continuing with the separated families, which may result in their children being returned to their care.

Timely and bespoke support services

56. We heard compelling evidence about bespoke services which make a difference and result in positive outcomes for many young families. Reflect is a service by Barnardo's, funded by the Welsh Government, to support women who have previously had one or more children removed from their care. As Liz Baker described, these are women who are suffering from loss and grief, whom are often left without support following such a traumatic experience. They face significant challenges including the practicality of navigating benefits and housing, societal stigma of having a child removed and significant impact on their mental health. Reflect works to provide advice and support and works with the women "to enable them to make sense of their experiences, grow their own sense of identity and purpose in their lives."²⁶

57. Describing the service as "very much co-produced", Liz Baker explained that Reflect responds to the needs and wishes of the women they support. A lot of group work focusing on their well-being and mental health takes place as the women wanted more time with other women who'd had similar experiences. This network is valued because "they feel they're not being judged, there isn't this stigma, and they can slowly build their confidence up so that when they are ready to access mainstream training and services, then they feel that they've gained a sense of identity through that support."²⁷

58. We received positive evidence about various support services, including Baby and Me which is a partnership between Barnardo's and the local authority to deliver a trauma-informed, strength-based service to support the needs of vulnerable parents in Newport. One of the lessons learnt when the service was established, according to Sally Jenkins, Director of Social Services for Newport City Council, was to offer support as early as possible during pregnancy. This is now established practice across the health board to offer support, if appropriate, as soon as they become aware of the pregnancy. Doing so from an early stage provides an opportunity to build relationships and provide intensive packages of support including practical support with housing, caring for a baby, and

²⁶ [Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 21 March 2022, paragraph 112](#)

²⁷ [Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 21 March 2022, paragraph 113](#)

particularly the “emotional, relationship-based support [which] is what really matters.”²⁸

59. Similarly we’ve received positive feedback from Jig- So and Swansea local authority about their support service for vulnerable parents, including care-experienced parents. The Jig-so service consists of specialist midwives and local authority staff.²⁹

Case study

The community midwife referred a care experienced young person to Jig-so and child and family service. This happened 10 weeks after conception, resulting in a specialist midwife taking over, and an early allocation for parenting support. Jig-So supported the social worker’s assessment and plan and targeted their work, and they supported the young person with practical matters including housing and benefits before and after the birth. The 30 weeks to work with the young person before the birth provided opportunities to address many worries, reduce the risks and recognise strengths and opportunities. Positive relationships were developed between workers and the young person, including support from a foster carer and a mother and baby support group. The group provided an opportunity to meet other young parents in similar circumstances, and increased her support network. At seven months mum and baby lived independently and continued to received support from a specialist midwife and nursery nurse, one to one parenting support and group support facilitated by Jig-so and worked with other services.³⁰

60. Jig -so shared some feedback from their evaluations highlighting the positive impact their support is having on young parents’ lives.³¹

“Having regular visits and someone to talk to and listen to me. I couldn’t have done it without Jig-so”.

A parent supported by Jig-so

²⁸ [Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 25 April 2022, paragraph 49](#)

²⁹ [Correspondence from Jig-so, Swansea, 25 July 2022](#)

³⁰ [Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 25 April 2022, paragraph 51-53](#)

³¹ [Correspondence from Jig-So, Swansea, 25 July 2022](#)

“...very understanding and helped me to make positive changes and carried out sessions to suite my needs.”

A parent supported by Jig-so

61. Francesca Pritchard, Voices from Care, agreed that there are pockets of good practice where “there’s a transparent relationship between the care experienced parent and those corporate parents who are supporting those individuals, and providing a sustainable relationship from early pregnancy and then after birth, so that they’re able to support that individual in an early intervention model, and support through any transitions they might experience, such as moving placements, going into housing and independent living.”³²

Support networks

62. The importance of a support network and positive relationships was a consistent message throughout our inquiry. Most care experienced young people have little or no family or other positive relationships which can provide practical and emotional support.

63. NYAS, Barnardo’s and Jig-so provided examples of how their work encourages positive relationships and support young people to develop networks with friends, family, partner’s family or previous foster carers. Recognising the isolation many care experienced parents faced, particularly if their accommodation is not within their own community, Mark Carter described the positive work undertaken in Newport to promote these networks through family group conferences and lifelong links meetings.³³

64. Peer support is considered valuable by care experienced parents and service providers. The Unity Project have encouraged the young women they worked with to create their own support network and as a result a peer café support was established,

³² [Petitions Committee, Record of proceedings, 25 April 2022, paragraph 121](#)

³³ [Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 21 March 2022, paragraph 146](#)

“...where other like-minded young women can support other young women going through these same issues that they’ve faced, and be there as a peer support network for them.”³⁴

Daljit Kaur Morris, NYAS

65. Voices from Care Cymru also emphasised the significance of peer support, where there is “inherent trust because there are no barriers of judgment”, and they’re working to establish a national peer group of parents.³⁵

66. Sally Jenkins highlighted that that care experienced young people have inevitably “experienced huge degrees of trauma and loss, and they very often, sadly, don’t have the family support and the family framework around them that for any of us to be a successful parent we need.”³⁶

67. It is acknowledge by all service providers that young people need reparative work to address and understand their experiences in order to be able to move on. Given their experiences, additional support is required to develop and sustain relationships with families, friends or foster carer peer groups.

Advocacy

68. Advocacy for children and young people in care and leaving care is considered essential to ensure that their voices are heard and their rights are championed. Whilst there is a commitment in Wales to the active offer of independent advocacy for every care experienced child, we have heard about the difference it can make to care experienced parents.

69. Young people told us that they feel powerless when decisions are made about the wellbeing and safety of their child. The evidence from NYAS highlights similar experiences, including young mothers aged 14-15, who are still in care themselves feeling “that once they are pregnant, they are forgotten, their personal support dwindles, decisions are made as to where they will live and whether they will live with their babies.”³⁷

70. Advocacy has an important role in supporting care experienced parents to have a voice, clarify information and to ensure that they receive appropriate

³⁴ [Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 21 March 2022, paragraph 108](#)

³⁵ [Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 25 April 2022, paragraph 117](#)

³⁶ [Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 25 April 2022, paragraph 24](#)

³⁷ [Correspondence from NYAS 21 March 2022.pdf \(senedd.wales\)](#)

support. The evidence from care experienced parents, NYAS and Voices from Care has highlighted the value of advocacy and we welcomed the Deputy Minister for Social Services' commitment to increase the provision of parental advocacy. Welsh Government are working with third sector providers NYAS, TGP and the parent advocacy network to increase the provision "in order to make absolutely sure that there is someone there to speak up for the parents. I think that if we've got that in place, parental advocacy, that's going to make a huge difference in order to keep children at home."³⁸

71. In addition to advocacy services most local authorities have participation strategies to ensure that the voices of children and young people are heard. Annabel Lloyd from Rhondda Cynon Taff explained that she, like most heads of services, meets with care experienced young people. She described considerable work taking place to "hear a representative range of voices."³⁹ Likewise, Julie Davies described her intention to ensure that the corporate parenting board in Swansea continues to regularly hear the voices of care experienced parents, which is particularly important.⁴⁰

Local authority challenges

72. A paper produced by all of Wales's heads of children's services called 'Children's services pressures', shared with Committee members only, highlights the additional challenges, some of which include increasing demand. Annabel Lloyd provided an example of her own local authority, Rhondda Cynon Taf, where they have experienced a 42 per cent increase in demand over the last two years. As a result they've invested in "new types of early help services as new needs are emerging, particularly for smaller children who've been born during that pandemic period and haven't had the same opportunities."⁴¹

73. Another significant challenge is ensuring a sufficient workforce, as new and developing services require workers, the availability of qualified and experienced social workers for safeguarding and court work has diminished.

³⁸ [Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 16 June 2022, paragraph 26](#)

³⁹ [Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 25 April 2022, paragraph 69](#)

⁴⁰ [Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 25 April 2022, paragraph 71](#)

⁴¹ [Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 25 April 2022, paragraph 39](#)

“...some of the local authorities in Wales are working with teams that experience 30 or 40 per cent vacancy rates, and the context of that increasing demand adds to the constraints.”⁴²

Annabel Lloyd, Rhondda Cynon Taff local authority

74. Local authorities are also working with young people and families, previously unknown to them, who present with high-end complex needs, limiting the opportunities for prevention and support work as a result of the level of risk involved.

75. In order to work effectively, children’s services need to work collaboratively with partner services and for those services to be available when needed to provide integrated strength-based approaches across children and adolescents mental health services (CAMHS), education, and criminal justice to ensure that the ‘no wrong door’ approach is embedded across the board.⁴³ Julie Davies drew attention to the lack of sufficient mental health services for adolescents and a need for improved support and timely services throughout Wales.⁴⁴

76. The Children’s Commissioner for Wales informed us that finding suitable placements is often challenging, resulting in the young parents and their babies being placed far away from any support networks. She also told the committee that parents can become caught between their own support needs and the need to provide their parenting skills in unfamiliar surroundings, often whilst under intense scrutiny and assessment.⁴⁵

77. Local authorities noted that they face serious challenges in relation to placements for young people in care and for a parent and child placement. However, removing a parent and child out of their community to be placed in a residential or foster placement is not seen as conducive to developing relationships and support within their community, according to Sally Jenkins. It’s also difficult to provide the right support within the community whilst services are under immense pressures.⁴⁶ Others, including NYAS and Voices from Care, call for more options to be available in terms of mother and baby placements, including options which include the father or partner.⁴⁷ Barnardo’s shared a sad example of

⁴² [Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 25 April 2022, paragraph 40](#)

⁴³ [Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 25 April 2022, paragraph 42](#)

⁴⁴ [Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 25 April 2022, paragraph 44](#)

⁴⁵ [Correspondence from the Children’s Commissioner for Wales, 3 September 2021](#)

⁴⁶ [Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 25 April 2022, paragraph 46](#)

⁴⁷ [Correspondence from NYAS 21 March 2022.pdf \(senedd.wales\)](#)

where the inability to find a suitable placement locally contributed to the breakdown of the mother and baby placement.⁴⁸

78. Ensuring suitable housing within their community is also a significant issue raised by young people and service providers. NYAS Cymru noted that there are significant difficulties regarding finding suitable housing and also keeping a tenancy whilst being assessed in a mother and baby placement. NYAS Operations Manager cited a horrendous example.

“A 21-year-old in her own flat who was moved to a mother and baby foster placement following the birth of her baby, and she wasn’t sure that her flat would be safe, and after two weeks, the flat was cleared and all her belongings were moved and she was told that she had to leave and vacate the room. Her baby and her were immediately put at risk, so our staff members were able to support at that moment of need. It is really challenging.”⁴⁹

Daljit Kaur Morris, NYAS

79. There is a significant challenge to improve corporate parenting across Wales. It is clear that children’s services cannot work effectively without partner agencies, as evidenced by Louise Roberts’ research, young people and service providers. As summarised by Sharon Lovell, corporate parenting should “not just rest with social services, but in other policy areas like housing, health, education, youth services, leisure, transport - everybody having a responsibility to be a shared parent for care experienced young people.”⁵⁰ This resonated throughout the evidence we heard. Young care experienced families need a multi-agency response, where barriers to services are removed and effective collaboration across all agencies is essential.

80. Accessing housing and mental health support are two of the areas which are problematic, which the Deputy Minister for Social Services acknowledged. Alistair Davey, Deputy Director, enabling people, health and social services group within Welsh Government, noted that work is progressing to look at supported accommodation and models of care put in place around those, which will inform the programme to strengthen corporate parenting and the relationship between social services and housing.⁵¹

⁴⁸ [Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 21 March 2022, paragraph 125](#)

⁴⁹ [Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 21 March 2022, paragraph 100](#)

⁵⁰ [Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 21 March 2022, paragraph 131](#)

⁵¹ [Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 13 June 2022, Paragraph 50](#)

81. Children’s services and third sector organisations wholeheartedly support the good parenting charter for corporate parenting. The Vale of Glamorgan local authority informed us that they had already committed to implementing the charter.⁵² There are calls for this to become a statutory requirement to ensure a positive and meaningful commitment from across public sector organisations.

Evidence and outcomes

82. We welcome the importance placed on evidence and outcomes by the third sector services in ensuring that their work is having a positive impact and improving the lives of families. Sharon Lovell believes that the data demonstrates that Project Unity is “making a fundamental difference to the lives of young women and their children to prevent them from also entering the care system, through our intensive advocacy intervention to uphold their rights and entitlements.”⁵³ She noted that of the 108 women they have worked with, 50 per cent of those children have not been placed on the child protection register.⁵⁴ She also shared that they provide distance travelled evaluations, identifying how young women feel, their knowledge about their rights and entitlements, the legal system and the processes they are involve in at the outset and at the end of their intervention, and have supported young people to take part in Dr Louise Roberts’ research.

83. Similarly the partnership service Baby and Me worked with the ‘Born into Care’ research from the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory, by Professor Karen Broadhurst and Claire Mason, and developed a range of monitoring tools that have helped them evidence areas such as well-being. Their statistics highlight a significant reduction in how many children and parents are separated at birth. Mark Carter stated that “out of the 80 families that we supported up to the end of last year, over 61 per cent of those babies have gone home.”⁵⁵ He also highlighted that the Newport partnership which is responsible for the service has seen “better relationships with the social workers, ... support for parent and child placements also increase, where they’re available, and we’re seeing less time on the child protection register.”⁵⁶ The positive outcomes of the service was reinforced by Sally Jenkins, stating that Baby and Me has resulted in a 48% reduction in the number of new born babies being removed from their vulnerable parent/s.⁵⁷

⁵² [Correspondence from the Vale of Glamorgan local authority, 6 April 2022](#)

⁵³ [Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 21 March 2022, paragraph 119](#)

⁵⁴ [Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 21 March 2022, paragraph 118](#)

⁵⁵ [Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 21 March 2022, paragraph 121](#)

⁵⁶ [Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 21 March 2022, paragraph 122](#)

⁵⁷ [Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 25 April 2022, paragraph 59](#)

84. We heard of the rigorous monitoring process for the Newport service which is funded and monitored by the local authority and a recognition of the need to adapt as necessary to promote positive outcomes. Sally Jenkins also emphasised the value of locally developed services in partnership with other agencies such as health and education.

85. The Jig-so joint health and local authority team of midwives and parenting support workers also monitor outcomes with young families using distance travelled approach tools, evaluations, children closing to social services, children coming off the child protection register and children being removed. During 2021-2022, following the pandemic, 15 babies were removed either at birth or in the first year of their lives from families involved with the service. This was the outcome for 7% of their families, whilst 93% continued to care for their babies with extensive support from Jig-so.⁵⁸

86. In 2019 Swansea University completed a yearlong study on the project and published their report **Exploring practices and experiences within the JIG-SO multiagency young families' project**. It highlights the positive impact of early intervention, intensive one to one and group support and continued support following the child's birth. It highlights the "close, collaborative working relationships and joined up practices between the multi-agency partners, enabling a high level of communication to meet service users' often complex needs." It also states that the findings 'demonstrates the vital role that agencies such as Jig-so play in supporting young families to live healthier lives, both physically and socially.'⁵⁹

87. Learning from the evidence, changing and adapting to meet needs is clearly important and valued. We were heartened to hear that similar services are being developed in other areas of the country and that multi agency collaboration is at their core. Understanding more about care experienced parents' journey and outcomes will help to shape the design and development of future services.

⁵⁸ Correspondence from Jig- so project, Swansea, July 2022

⁵⁹ Correspondence from Jig- so project, Swansea, July 2022

6. Conclusions

- 88.** There are eight Programme for Government commitments that concern children’s services. We appreciated hearing from the Deputy Minister for Social Services about this programme of work during our inquiry. Whilst all of these are important and should be further and rigorously scrutinised over the coming years, we’ve focused on the areas particularly pertinent to our inquiry.
- 89.** The commitment to explore radical reform of current services for children looked after and care leavers in Wales is welcomed and is an opportunity to improve children and young people’s experiences and outcomes. The Deputy Minister outlined the “new vision and ambition for children’s services, based around consistent practice, less risk adverse behaviours and national restorative approaches to be adopted across Wales”,⁶⁰ and the establishment of an Oversight Board progressing this work, together with engagement with local authorities and care leavers.
- 90.** The evidence we’ve heard supports the need for radical reform to ensure that our systems and services become “more human - it is about being relationship-focused, strengths-based, inclusive and person-centred for those young people, but in a way where those professionals connect around that young person in a relational approach.”⁶¹
- 91.** Care experienced young people and services call for the reform to include support to access informal networks and be helped to develop and build relationships, addressing issues of isolation many face. Consideration should be given to implementing tried and tested models such as family group conferences and lifelong meetings. Barnardo’s shared that these have been hugely successful within their Newport partnership “with 88 per cent of the families who had a family group conference prior to the birth of their baby then being able to go home with their baby and live within their communities.”⁶² It has also highlighted the need for compassionate support for all parents who experience the trauma of having a child removed.
- 92.** The commitment and agreement to fund the delivery of parental advocacy to help prevent family break up from April 2022 is positive, and recognises the support needed by parents whose children are on the edge of care. The emphasis

⁶⁰ [Correspondence from the Deputy Minister from Social Services, 22 July 2022](#)

⁶¹ [Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 21 March 2022, paragraph 149](#)

⁶² [Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 21 March 2022, paragraph 146](#)

on developing a National Framework for Parent Advocacy against which regions will have to deliver, ensuring consistent service delivery throughout Wales is an important step.⁶³ Again, the evidence demonstrates the positive difference independent parental advocacy can make. NYAS calls for both the UNITY project and all parental advocacy to be aligned in the future.⁶⁴ It is also important that parents are informed of the advocacy provision during their initial contacts with services.

93. Strengthening public bodies in their role as corporate parent is a thread that weaves through all the evidence. Everyone who contributed to this inquiry is calling for changes and for those changes to happen quickly. Whilst it's encouraging that the Welsh Government will also be developing a statutory code for corporate parenting in 2024, this must reflect the charter developed by CASCADE, young people and partners, based on evidence and research. This is a fundamental starting point in order to start to genuinely address the negative experiences faced by young people and to provide a level of support more akin to what a good parent would provide. It is clear that this should not only rest with children's services, as they cannot provide the support required without the full commitment of housing, health, education and others. Extending corporate parenting duties up to the age of 25 in another step in the right direction according to advocacy providers, as many care experienced parents over 21 would benefit from additional support.

94. Whilst these are ambitious changes we must ensure that care experienced children, young people and parents are involved in the shaping and developing of new approaches and services, and that their experiences and insights are placed at the heart of the reform.

95. This is an opportunity to change the system, to change the culture and to improve the lives of care experienced families.

⁶³ [Correspondence from the Deputy Minister from Social Services, 22 July 2022](#)

⁶⁴ [Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 21 March 2022, paragraph 130](#)

Annex 1: Engagement with care experienced parents

Welsh Parliament
Citizen Engagement

Engagement Summary

Care experienced parents

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'

Annex 2: List of oral evidence sessions.

The following witnesses provided oral evidence to the committee on the dates noted below. Transcripts of all oral evidence sessions can be viewed on the Committee's website.

Date	Name and Organisation
<p>21 March 2022</p>	<p>Dr Louise Roberts, Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre (CASCADE)</p> <p>Jennifer Molloy, Care experienced parent</p> <p>Mark Carter, Barnardo's Cymru South East Wales</p> <p>Liz Baker, Barnardo's Cymru Cardiff and Vale</p> <p>Sharon Lovell, The National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS)</p> <p>Daljit Kaur Morris, The National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS)</p>
<p>25 April 2022</p>	<p>Sally Jenkins, Newport City Council</p> <p>Annabel Lloyd, Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council</p> <p>Julie Davies, City and Council for Swansea</p> <p>Deborah Jones, Voices from Care Cymru</p> <p>Francesca Pritchard, Voices from Care Cymru</p>
<p>13 June 2022</p>	<p>Julie Morgan MS, Deputy Minister for Social Services</p> <p>Alistair Davey, Deputy Director, Enabling People, Welsh Government</p>

Annex 3: List of written evidence

The following people and organisations provided written evidence to the Committee. All written information can be viewed on the Committee's website.

Title	Date
Letter to the Chair from the Children's Commissioner for Wales	3 September 2021
Letter to the Chair from the Vale of Glamorgan Council	6 April 2022
Letter to the Chair from the Deputy Minister for Social Services	26 April 2022
Letter to the Chair from Voices form Care Cymru	13 May 2022
Letter to the Chair from ADSS Cymru	18 May 2022
Letter to the Chair from the Deputy Minister for Social Services	22 July 2022
Letter to the Chair from Jig-so	25 July 2022