



A Place to Call Home

Understanding placement quality in the
children's social care system in Wales

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Introduction

On 31 March 2023 there were [7,208 'looked after' children in Wales](#).

This number has consistently grown over the last decade – despite [a slight drop in 2022](#). [For every 10,000 people aged under 18 in Wales, 116.3 are in care](#), compared to 91 per 10,000 in 2013.

This has caused significant challenges for local authorities across Wales. These include:

- **Appropriate placements (matching children to the right homes that can meet their needs).**
- **Placement locations (children can be sent away from their communities to other counties).**
- **Lack of both in-house and third sector placements (some private operators are the only option).**
- **Increased use of unregulated placements.**
- **Lack of competition (fewer options means the cost rises).**

The situation in Wales so far

Programme for Government

The challenges we highlighted can have a dramatic impact on children and young people. Sometimes it's necessary for children to be removed from their communities. The Welsh government wants to see more placements where links to local neighbourhoods and communities remain to provide continuity.

The Welsh government is also keen to improve placement stability. It feels Wales needs to develop more high-quality placement options for children and young people. As at March 2023, 669 children in care in Wales had three or more placements during the year – an increase of 8% on the year before.

To help solve these problems, Wales' Programme for Government provided eight commitments for children's services:

1. **Explore radical reform of current services for looked after children and care leavers.**
2. **Eliminate private profit from the care of looked after children during the next Senedd term.**
3. **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.**
4. **Strengthen public bodies in their role as 'corporate parent'.**
5. **Prevent families from breaking up by funding advocacy services for parents whose children are at risk of coming into care.**

The Health and Social Care Bill

The Health and Social Care (Wales) Bill was introduced to the Senedd on 20 May 2024. It is currently at stage 1 (consideration of general principles of the bill by Committee and agreement of those general principles by the Senedd). Most provisions of the bill would be within the legislative competence of the Senedd. Only paragraph 4 of schedule 2 to the bill, which amends the Safeguarding of Vulnerable Groups Act 2006, would not. Consent is needed from the UK government to bring it within the Senedd's competence. This hasn't yet been granted.

The Health and Social Care (Wales) Bill aims to:

- **Eliminate private profit from the care of looked after children.**
- **Enable introduction of Direct Payments for NHS Continuing Healthcare (CHC).**
- **Make amendments to ensure that the Regulation and Inspection of Social Care (Wales) Act 2016 and Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 are able to operate fully and effectively.**
- **Provide additional specialist support for children with complex needs who may be on the edge of care.**
- **Continue to support and uphold the rights of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people.**
- **Support our national Fostering Wales scheme.**

The new bill follows measures over the last thirteen years to improve children's social care in Wales.

In 2014, the Social Services and Wellbeing Act was introduced. It established a new framework for local authority social services in Wales. The act provides the legal framework for improving the wellbeing of people who need care and support, for carers who need care and support and for transforming social services in Wales.

In 2016 the Regulation and Inspection of Social Care (Wales) Act was introduced. The 2016 act provides a statutory framework for regulating and inspecting social care services, plus a framework for regulating the social care workforce in Wales.

Through this new bill, ministers want to further improve social care here in Wales. In particular, the bill looks to eliminate profit from the care of looked after children.

Removal of profit from care

As a member of the Programme board, Action for Children continues to support the campaign for the removal of profit from the care of looked after children. We were pleased to see the Health and Social Care Bill introduced to the Senedd in May this year. The Bill will restrict the ability of the private sector to extract profit from the children's social care environment, with the focus moving to not-for-profit providers and local authorities being able to provide fostering, children's homes and secure accommodation. Sufficient time needs to be in place to make sure that there is a smooth transition and that there is no detriment to young people.

Our research

As the Health and Social Care Bill passes through the Senedd, we want to make sure the experiences of young people, and those working in the sector, shape policy-makers' decisions.

For our research, we interviewed staff with experience of providing homes for children in care in Wales. Our questions included:

- What makes a good home for a child in care?
- What stops homes from being good places to live?
- What needs to change to provide better homes for children in care?

Our findings

What makes a good home for a child in care?

Somewhere that feels like home

Staff said each home should be appropriate for the young person in care and feel like home. One person spoke about the importance of the matching process and including expert opinions in that process. Staff were also clear there were some basic things all homes should get right.



“A good residential home should resemble a home for any child or young person as close to living with their family. It should be of a good standard, warm and welcoming. Children and young people [should] feel safe and protected and [be] proud to welcome friends, family and visitors without feeling it’s institutionalised or different from a family home.”

Providing an element of personalisation is important to make children feel at home – both in the physical environment and the care and support given to a child.



“It is also personalisation of the environment. For example, we like to encourage our young people to feel included in the personalisation of their bedroom and other communal areas so that it feels like they have input into their own home. We also promote young people to be included in choice of activities, hobbies/interests and residential trips away. We try to ensure that the residential home is a safe space, nurturing and an adaptable area so that it promotes personal growth and meets their individual development needs.”

Positive relationships and expert staff

The most common feature of a good home people mentioned in interviews was the relationships between staff and young people.



“Relationships are key. We can have the nicest facilities and activities but if we don’t have positive, trusting relationships with our young people as individuals then there’s no way the residential provision will ever feel like their home. This is very much driven by the individuals and what they want from us. [It is] often how they view adults. Many will have been let down by adults in the past for a variety of reasons. It is understanding them as individuals, encouraging their strengths and helping them become the best version of themselves every day that hopefully builds that trust.”

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“Having a constant team of carers who understand the child's history and needs promotes trust and security. When carers respond with warmth and acceptance, particularly when a young person is struggling, it promotes the notion that the home is a safe haven where they can be themselves without fear of being judged.”

Great everyday care

People we interviewed regularly spoke about the actual care and support offered to young people. Providing great care can be complex. But often people spoke about the simple elements – like forming relationships and setting consistent routines.

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“Day to day it can be as simple as sitting and watching TV with them, preparing food and eating together – positive routines that support their wellbeing. This in turn will hopefully give them the ability to access education at an appropriate level for them, being rested, well-fed and in the best place to learn.”

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“A good residential home is defined by its ability to create a consistent, caring atmosphere in which children can feel a sense of belonging.”

One key feature that emerged was the importance of involving children and young people in their own home and care.

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“We use a nurture/relationship approach with our young people to make sure they feel heard and have a sense of belonging. Our young people are actively involved in all decision-making processes in the homes. They're given choices to participate in their reviews and to set personal targets throughout their stay.”

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“Our one-to-ones are often informal, maybe just a drive in the car. But they often elicit little gems of information [about] what our young people like and don't like and also contribute to the relationships mentioned above.”

Access to opportunities and support

Staff told us about the outside opportunities and support some children need.

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“[They need outside opportunities and support] to ensure they can be a child/young person in the community they live, meet developmental milestones, have fun and are protected from harm. They should not miss out on anything just because they are in care. [Their home should be] somewhere they want to bring their friends for tea or sleep-overs.”

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“Providing a variety of activities that promote learning, creativity and social connection benefits both their immediate enjoyment and long-term development. Our young people are encouraged to express their opinions and participate in decisions that impact them, making them feel respected and valued.”

Staff spoke about opportunities and finding activities that matched children’s interests. They also highlighted the importance of being able to contact and work closely with other professionals to ensure children get the support they need.

What stops homes from being good places to live?

Recruitment and retention problems

The number one problem that emerged was personnel. Staff spoke about recruitment, retention and training. They were often sympathetic to the challenges others working in the sector faced.

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“Staffing and staff retention is always an issue. It’s a difficult job, and the hours can be long meaning staff move on. This impacts the continuity of care for young people and can impact trust if they have a particularly strong relationship with individual staff members. We often see young people come here where they have had lots of staff changes, perhaps agency staff. It has a profound impact on their view of the care system.”

Staff also mentioned the importance of training and the impact lack of training can have on children.

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“Staff members who lack sufficient training in trauma-informed care run the risk of unintentionally retraumatising children or failing to offer the necessary support. These patterns may result in settings where young people feel mistreated, uncomfortable and unsupported. This may have a negative long-term effect on them.”

Finding a home that meets a child's needs

Staff spoke about matching and the negative impact rushing to find a placement or fill a home can have on children.



“I've visited homes where they have been rushed to open and [are] not in control of who is placed with them, so the matching compatibility isn't taken into account.”

That included where homes weren't designed around children but were provided in a standard – or one-size-fits-all – way.

Being unable to express their feelings

Central to creating a good place to live was the importance of including and involving children in the home and decisions about them. Barriers to this happening were seen as key challenges for providing good homes.

Staff said that relationships were key to making this happen.



“I feel that relationships are a pivotal factor in whether children are enabled to express their feelings about the residential support they receive.”

Staff also mentioned having a range of ways young people could share their feelings and thoughts rather than expecting feedback through certain channels at certain times.



“One of our young people often says exactly what they're feeling when out on long walks with staff. [This is] possibly because of familiarity, possibly because they feel it is a safe space away from their fellow housemates. [It's] definitely because they are relaxed and they would be unlikely to communicate if they were sat in the house and asked a direct question.”



“Regular check-ins, in which professionals actively listen without passing judgement, as well as creative outlets such as painting or play therapy, can help our young people open up about their experiences.”



“They'll need access to their social worker, therapist, teachers and other professionals such as Advocacy or Independent Visitors, [plus] other adults they can relate to. We need to share things with different people at different times.”

What needs to change to provide better homes for children?

Finally, we asked staff in Wales what needed to change to provide better homes for children in care. The key question staff would like decision-makers to ask was: would this be good enough for their own children? There were also some specific areas they wanted policy-makers to consider.

1. **Are there enough homes?** This included ensuring there are enough appropriate homes for children that can't live with their families. One staff member said this should start with enough "small, home-like environments with a low child-to-staff ratio [that] can provide personalised, relational care that larger institutions cannot".
2. **Are there the right staff with the right support?** The people in the system and their relationships with young people were referenced throughout. One staff member said decision-makers should:

"...recognise that those who work in care are highly skilled and require adequate training, ongoing development and commitment. This needs to be reflected in their pay and the recognition shown for those working in this sector."

3. **Do children get the right type of care and support?** Staff consistently discussed the actual content of care provided to children. This meant the way they're included in decisions, activities and opportunities provided and whether they could live like children not living in care. Key to this was personalisation.

"I would advise them to emphasise the importance of personal plans, as each child's personal plan should be specific to their needs and reviewed on a frequent basis to ensure it is fulfilling their changing lives."

What next?

We're calling on UK governments to take immediate action on children's social care, so children in care get the high-quality homes, love and support they need to thrive.

Find out more: actionforchildren.uk/APlaceToCallHome

Acknowledgements

We're very grateful to our staff with experience of providing homes for children in care in Wales for sharing their professional insights with us.



Safe and happy childhood

Action for Children protects and supports children and young people, providing practical and emotional care and support, ensuring their voices are heard, and campaigning to bring lasting improvements to their lives.

Action for Children

St David's Court

68a Cowbridge Road East, Cardiff CF11 9DN

Llys Dewi Sant

68a Heol y Bontfaen, Caerdydd CF11 9DN

actionforchildren.org.uk



/actionforchildren



@actnforchildren



@actionforchildreuk