

1. Before care: Safely reducing the number of children in the care system

Please outline a **maximum of three** top priorities for radical reform of services for safely reducing the number of children in the care system:

Priority 1:

The cost-of-living and the impact on families and services that support them

A recent survey¹ of Barnardo's practitioners across the UK found that:

- 62% have supported families in our services with access to foodbanks
- 53% have given families clothes or signposted to free clothing
- 49% have supported families who are struggling to choose between heating and eating

The most common concern of service users experiencing poverty was access to food (88%) and energy (87%).

There are concerns about the impact of deprivation on families that are on the edge of care:

*"We have recently worked with a family under the category of neglect. As it turned out, Mum was not neglectful, she was poor."*²

¹ Barnardo's Quarterly Practitioner Survey (QPS) Wave 13 7 July – 28 July 2022

² 'Report on the Annual Child and Family Poverty Survey 2022' Children in Wales

https://www.childreninwales.org.uk/application/files/6416/6487/3691/CIW_Poverty_report_2022_English.pdf

We would urge Welsh Government to look with ambitious eyes at the refresh of the Child Poverty Strategy. This strategy should be truly cross-cutting of government departments, with a lens on how we reduce the impact that poverty has on families who are on the edge of care, and have children removed, and on those children moving through the care system and transitioning to adulthood and independence. We know that these marginalised groups often experience the very worst consequences of poverty.

If the Child Poverty Strategy is intended to span 10 years, then we would urge Welsh Government not only to make decisions based on today's financial constraints, but to be ambitious for how we can support families in Wales in the coming years.

For example, in the medium- to long-term, exploring a Wales Child Payment, similar to the scheme in Scotland, could potentially help lift thousands of families out of poverty and provide support for some of the financial challenges of parenting. We believe that the more we can support families out of poverty, the more effective we can be at supporting them in all areas, including early intervention and family support.

We know that Welsh Government has been forced to make difficult decisions due to the financial impact on their budgets, but we would urge them to look at whether it is possible to rollout free school meals to all children whose households are in receipt of universal credit immediately, without waiting for the universal rollout to take place.

If we recognise the impact of the cost-of-living and poverty on families who might be on the edge of care, we must be committed to taking steps – both in the short and longer term – to mitigate this wherever possible, given that evidence demonstrates that children living in Wales' most deprived areas are 16 times more likely to go into care than those living in the most affluent areas.³

The effects of the cost-of-living are felt beyond family finances. It is Barnardo's Cymru's view that there can no longer be a conversation about before care and early intervention and prevention without a conversation about sustainability and the financial consequences of recent years.

In 2023 already, we have heard numerous examples of services that will be forced to reduce their offer / reach fewer families or cease operating entirely

³ The Child Welfare Inequalities Project: Final Report Paul Bywaters and the Child Welfare Inequalities Project Team July 2020
<https://www.coventry.ac.uk/globalassets/media/global/08-new-research-section/cih/cwip-overview-final-v4.pdf>

because of budget cuts. Early intervention and prevention services are more likely to face cuts as opposed to statutory services.

Many services are facing significant cost pressures due to inflation and the cost-of-living, in addition to the fact that there has been no uplift in many contracts for a number of years which means that many contracts have seen a real terms cut of 12-24% over the period of a commissioned contract when the effects of inflation are added to this⁴. This is forcing voluntary sector organisations to consider whether they can realistically afford to continue to provide certain services.

Alongside this, the experiences of families who are facing the brunt of the cost-of-living crisis and the increasing entrenchment of poverty in Wales has resulted in cases presenting to services with more acute needs and complex issues, which early intervention and prevention services are struggling to address.

One Barnardo's service has seen increasing levels of complexity and need:

- Increased demand: During 2020-2021 the Service received a total of 130 new referrals within the year; and engaged with 232 families. During 2021-2022 the Service received a total of 213 new referrals – an increase of 64% and engaged with 330 families, an increase of 42%.
- Increase in complexity and need: 40% increase in mental health needs of families referred.
- Barnardo's is bringing in additional money to supply families with essential items that they need.
- Poverty is exacerbating experiences of families.⁵

Another family support service has noted that 50% of their referrals include young people at risk of or being exploited. Prior to the pandemic this would have qualified for a statutory response but due to pressures in all parts of the system, are now held by early help and family support teams.

Increased demand, high complexity and the rise that social work staff are seeing in statutory thresholds due to social work pressures mean that early intervention teams feel strongly that they have drifted towards providing edge of care support to families who are on the verge of crisis. This leaves a gap where early intervention should sit. Naturally, there is good practice within this space and many local authorities are innovating to offer this, but many of the schemes designed to address early intervention funded under the Families First programme now feel that they have drifted from genuine and effective early intervention when a family first faces difficulties, creating a risk that families will not be supported early enough

⁴ Based on internal Barnardo's reporting and estimates

⁵ This data is based on internal Barnardo's reporting

We have urged Welsh Government to address this as a priority and to review early intervention across Wales with a view to outlining a new early intervention and prevention strategy for children's social care. This would be with a view to outlining a new early intervention and prevention strategy for children's social care, encompassing both how we can ensure there is universal support available for all families in supporting them to raise their children and how there is more specialist support available for families who face specific challenge

Priority 2:

Early intervention and prevention (including specialist responses)

There is now a wealth of evidence to point to in relation to the fact that early intervention and prevention services are effective in keeping families safely together and preventing children from going into care wherever possible. Early intervention and prevention services can look different depending on their purpose, with many local authorities investing in specialist services to meet a particular need.

Social Care Wales states that "tackling poverty and building community resilience with services aimed at keeping families together helps to reduce the numbers of children entering care."⁶

Some examples of early intervention and prevention services include:

Newport City Council and Barnardo's Cymru Partnership was established in 2011 and provides innovative responses to challenges facing families in Newport, particularly those on the edge of care. Under the umbrella of the Family Support Service, interventions include Baby & Me (described below), the Rapid Response team that works with older children and teenagers on the edge of care, Lifelong Links, and Family Group Conferencing.

This strategic partnership is constantly evolving through the identification of existing or potential areas of development through a wide range of learning processes including co-production with young people and families, thematic case audits, internal research, transparent reporting, and a collective desire to provide innovative solutions in meeting the needs of children and families.

- 100% of families said that they would recommend Family Support Service to other families
- The Rapid Response service has supported 91% (65) of children and young people to remain at home.

⁶ <https://socialcare.wales/service-improvement/safely-reducing-the-need-for-children-to-enter-care#section-34029-anchor>

There is a key cultural difference that is seen in a strategic partnership which is built upon collaborative responsibility between the local authority and third sector partner, where both partners recognise the benefits of investing to save and working collaboratively towards a common goal.

Baby & Me, a specialist pre- and post-birth service for families⁷ where there would be a risk of a new born baby going into care in Newport, has reduced the number of care orders for new borns by 48% in two years, by working with families early on and throughout pregnancy to help support creating a positive family setting for parents and children.⁸ One Baby & Me parent said:

"I actually feel like I've been seen for me as person and the person I am now, not everything that happened in the past. I don't feel like I've been judged by what's happened in the past."

Cyfle: Family Life Skills Service, Denbighshire, provides early support to families and works to ensure they are assisted to address a variety of needs. The service engages and works with families who have children aged 0-18, offering bespoke support in several ways, including direct work with parents/carers and children, group work, and signposting to other agencies.⁹

Cardiff Young Families, in partnership with Cardiff City Council, provides supported accommodation to vulnerable young families where the parent is aged 16-21. The service is aimed at those with housing and parenting support needs and helps young people develop the skills to live independently in their communities. This is achieved through a trauma-informed response and each family lives in a self-contained flat within the setting.¹⁰

Our priority for Welsh Government would be to address the systemic fragility and instability within this sector (see our comments under priority 1) as well as supporting local authorities and third sector partners to work in partnership to develop specialist responses to meet population needs.

We would also urge Welsh Government to look for opportunities to expand what works – for example, Baby & Me serves the population of Newport but is regularly approached to support families outside of the area. Every family, regardless of where they live, should be able to access the specialist support that would help keep their family together.

⁷ <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/what-we-do/services/baby-me>

⁸ Evaluation of Baby & Me Service – Final Report. Research in Practice, November 2022

⁹ <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/what-we-do/services/cyfle-family-life-skills-services>

¹⁰ <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/what-we-do/services/cardiff-supported-housing-young-families>

In a focus group with practitioners it was noted that there are different thresholds and different guidance for what constitutes a statutory intervention from one local authority to another. This undermines the need for consistency in child protection across Wales and will inevitably lead to more children on Child Protection Orders or in care proceedings in some local authorities than others. A Wales-wide standard and accompanying threshold guidance would help underpin better consistency in delivering for children and young people, as well as ensuring that early intervention and prevention services are able to support families whilst being able to make a timely and appropriate referral for escalation when needed.

Priority 3:

Supporting the whole family

Providing adequate support for the whole family is something that Barnardo's Cymru practitioners have heard from parents many times.

One practitioner in an early intervention service outlined that in their experience, parents rarely feel supported and feel as though 'I wish I had never told you now' in relation to the lack of a nurturing response to disclosures. This is particularly the case when parents disclose the stress they feel about parenting when it comes to having thoughts about physically punishing a child, for example.

Inter-parental conflict and domestic abuse

We know that a series of incredibly difficult years – beginning with the pandemic and continuing with the cost-of-living crisis - means that families are under more acute stress than ever before. We see many examples of how this tension is playing out within family homes and how it is escalating and entrenching pre-existing issues.

Barnardo's Cymru has previously called for dedicated funding for addressing inter-parental conflict¹¹ and for providing training to social care staff across Wales. It is the view of many Barnardo's practitioners that tackling inter-parental conflict at the earliest possible level can prevent escalation to domestic abuse.

It is Barnardo's Cymru's position that domestic abuse is an edge of care issue and should be prioritised as such by Welsh Government. Domestic abuse presents as a factor in 'the majority' of child protection cases, as reported by

¹¹ Barnardo's Cymru response to the Finance Committee Consultation on Welsh Government Budget 22/23 <https://cms.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-04/Barnardo%27s%20Cymru%20letter%20to%20Finance%20Committee%20-%20budget%20consultation.pdf>

social work colleagues, but not does receive parity of attention in terms of funding for children's services.

The impact of domestic abuse on child protection and care proceedings can be evidenced by Barnardo's data, such as that collected by Reflect which found that 72% of Reflect mothers (who were supported by Barnardo's Cymru due to having had a child permanently removed from their care) had previously experienced domestic abuse.¹² Growing up in a household with domestic abuse is also an Adverse Childhood Experience.¹³

In Newport, Barnardo's Cymru operated a whole-family domestic abuse service called Opening Closed Doors until October 2022, which intervened and worked with the whole-family where domestic abuse had caused a family to be on the edge of care. An independent evaluation undertaken by the Institute of Public Care found that there was also a tangible reduction in the level of statutory need evidenced in case files supported by Barnardo's Opening Closed Doors including the RESET programme, suggesting that children were demonstrably safer in approximately half of these cases. Through tracking children's legal statuses, during 2020/21 we have been able to support families and frontline teams to help to improve or stabilise risks meaning that 89% of children's legal statuses either reduced or did not escalate.

This service closed due to lack of funding at the end of 2022, leaving a significant gap in support across Gwent.

We know that these are not just issues that are felt in Newport. A report commissioned by Joyce Watson MS and undertaken by Welsh Women's Aid into domestic abuse services for children and young people found that there was a 'postcode lottery' across local authorities around how funding is categorised and spent on Children and Young People Services, leading to some children and young people in Wales reporting a significant impact on their ability to recover from abuse.¹⁴

We welcome the creation of the VAWDASV work stream for children and young people, chaired by Eleri Thomas MBE, and would urge Welsh Government to prioritise a review of services designed to support child victims of domestic abuse, and to prioritise funding whole-family support services that focus on making the family home safer and helping support families who are on the edge of care due to domestic abuse.

Working with Dads

¹² REFLECT NATIONAL END OF YEAR PERFORMANCE REVIEW REPORT 2021/2022

¹³ Adverse Childhood Experiences and their association with Mental Well-being in the Welsh adult population, Public Health Wales <https://phw.nhs.wales/files/aces/ace-and-their-association-with-mental-well-being-in-the-welsh-adult-population-pdf/>

¹⁴ A duty to support: A research report reviewing support for children and young people experiencing violence and abuse in Wales.

Appropriate support for the whole family must include supporting fathers who have had children removed or are on the edge of care. Barnardo's Reflect model works with mothers and fathers of children permanently removed in Wales, and is operating across most of Wales. Reflect is eager to do more to engage with fathers in their own right, as is Baby & Me in Newport, and we would urge Welsh Government to look at how they can invest in this.

The aims of Reflect are to:

- Break the cycle of repeat pregnancies, where the outcome is likely to be removal of the child.
- Give mothers and fathers the opportunity to reflect by providing a holistic intensive support at an extremely difficult time in people's lives and develop new skills that can help them achieve their future.
- Work with mothers and fathers to reduce the numbers of children taken into care.

In the independent evaluation of the project, one recommendation was that there be increased scope to work with fathers in the future.¹⁵ The Nuffield Family Justice Observatory has also observed in its research that most programmes support mothers on their own, or mothers and fathers together, and do not work with fathers on their own.¹⁶

Our priority for Welsh Government would be investment in services that can support fathers – both alongside the mother and in their own right. Existing models are eager to work further with fathers and we would encourage Welsh Government to invest in rolling out greater support to develop culturally competent practice and investing in male workers in services who can support male service users.

2. In care: Quality services and support for children in care

Please outline a **maximum of three** top priorities for radical reform of services for children in care:

Priority 1:

Redressing the inequity in kinship care

Currently, there is an expectation that kinship foster carers meet the same expectations and regulations as generic foster carers and that is often simply unrealistic. Foster carers have often received more support over a longer period of time than a potential kinship carer who would have considered this role because of family circumstance with far less time to prepare.

Through our Families Together work, we have seen family situations where stringent fostering regulations are potentially jeopardising stable placements. We have supported an aunt who has been a successful kinship foster carer for 6

¹⁵ Evaluation of Reflect in Gwent, CASCADE, 2018
<https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/123258/1/Reflect%20report%20published.pdf>

¹⁶ "Mothers in recurrent care proceedings: New evidence for England and Wales" Nuffield Family Justice Observatory, November 2022

years since her niece was a baby. However she refuses to keep daily records as this does not feel like a natural thing to do, and she does not do this for her own daughter. She is now being told she is risking losing her 'foster carer' status because of this. We have also seen many family carers who can provide loving and safe homes for children, however do not pass the strict criteria of the fostering assessments.

Kinship carers often have the same issues within their families as the children's parents and so it becomes difficult to always evidence that they can meet fostering regulations. This is despite the fact that kinship carers, particularly with the right support as evidenced by the Monmouthshire Families Together¹⁷ service – can offer children a stable, loving home.

Monmouthshire County Council are an example of a local authority that have implemented a range of good practices in relation to kinship care. Another example of this is that the local authority continues to provide fostering allowance to any kinship carers who progress through to Special Guardianship Order (SGO) as a SGO allowance. This is not currently a legal requirement.

The current statutory requirement is for a means-tested financial assessment and then an allowance to be paid in accordance with that. In practice, this means that many kinship foster carers would be put off seeking a SGO as it means that they would be financially disadvantaged. It has meant that for years children living with kinship carers have remained Looked After for longer than needed purely because the carers aren't able to be financially disadvantaged.

Monmouthshire has continued to pay the same rate for kinship carers transferring to SGO and Barnardo's would urge Welsh Government to consider making this a legal requirement so that kinship carers are not financially disadvantaged in pursuing a SGO and can feel confident of their financial security moving forwards in every local authority in Wales.

Priority 2:

Crisis in social care and foster care

Wales is facing a social care crisis across the sector that is already having significant effects on the landscape, with a recruitment and retention crisis that is seriously hampering the sector's ability to respond to major change.

It is a concern that with the sector already being so unstable, delivering radical reform of children's social care could be incredibly difficult.

¹⁷ <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-01/Families%20Together%20impact%20and%20cost%20implications%20report.pdf> and Qualitative evaluation of Monmouthshire Families Together <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-01/Families%20Together%20qualitative%20report.pdf>

The workforce that we rely on to care for children is one of the most dedicated and professional, doing one of the most important and often difficult jobs. Despite this, they are part of a system that is under significant stress for a multitude of reasons including high caseloads, staffing issues, risks relating to safeguarding and much more.¹⁸

As part of the approach to radically reforming children's social care, we would urge Welsh Government to invest in new efforts to ensure that children's social care is viewed as an attractive career opportunity that is well-paid, respected and supported. This should include support for training and education, and a campaign focusing on the huge contribution of the social care sector to the lives of children and young people. Children's social care staff are as important to our society as NHS staff, and we would look to the efforts to support NHS staff in recent years as an example of the perception of a social care career that must be fostered.

As part of making children's social care an attractive career, and to encourage more people to consider working in the sector, we must tackle the demonisation of social workers that has taken place in parts of the media, and the abuse that social workers often receive that would not be tolerated in other professions (whilst continuing to ensure that where there are mistakes or poor practice these are addressed robustly). We hope to work with Welsh Government on this.

If we do not invest in the future of the workforce, the social care crisis will become even more acute at a time when we will rely on them to deliver stability and certainty to young people when they are otherwise facing yet more change and upheaval in their lives.

The social care crisis extends to foster care. In a focus group of six care-experienced young people aged 16 – 20, we were told that 'a more honest message about caring' is needed, and they hope to see it come about because of this change:

"At the moment, the portrayed message is that caring and looking after children and young people is a rewarding and great experience, but this is portraying a false reality. Caring has its challenges and this should be highlighted."

Many of the young people said they knew foster carers who nearly gave up after a few months due to the challenges they faced but were not informed about.

Barnardo's Cymru has made an urgent appeal for more people to consider becoming foster carers, after the number of older children referred to its fostering services jumped by 18% in just 12 months¹⁹.

¹⁸ Children's social services and care rates in Wales: A survey of the sector CASCADE Centre for Children's Social Care and Wales Centre for Public Policy, Cardiff University September 2021 https://www.wcpp.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/220216-Childrens-social-services_en_final.pdf

¹⁹ Figures released by Barnardo's show that between August 2021 and July 2022, the number of children referred to its UK-wide fostering services was 19,996. This is a rise of 28 per cent, compared with the previous 12-month period when the figure was 15,642. In England the rise in referrals was 28 per cent, in Wales 18 per cent and in Scotland 50 per cent.

Barnardo's Cymru has seen overall referrals increase from 694 to 818 children in the last year, up 18%. But demand has increased even more for homes for those aged 11 and over, up 25% from 380 to 477 (August 2021 to July 2022).²⁰

The crisis in foster caring is felt more acutely in some parts of Wales than others, with North Wales colleagues sharing particular concerns about the ability to source foster placements close to home for children and young people.

The issues within foster care also extend to When I'm Ready placements, with a lack of consistency across different local authorities. Colleagues note that where a local authority employs a 'When I'm Ready Coordinator' there is leadership and cohesion for the programme. Without this, they see drift and a lack of focus which results in negative outcomes for young people. Practitioners gave examples of placements ending abruptly (after children had been living with families for a number of years) because the foster carers were offered the opportunity to care for a young person, which has a higher financial incentive than a When I'm Ready placement. This has seen young people moved to B&B accommodation with little notice and no time to plan for a transition, which is extremely traumatic for young people.

Our recommendation to Welsh Government would be to invest in and ringfence funding for a When I'm Ready Coordinator for every local authority to ensure that the scheme is given the best chance to succeed for all young people, as well as taking action under the eliminate agenda to promote and recruit more foster carers.

Priority 3:

Mental Health

Despite the fact that care experienced young people are a population who we know have experienced trauma, disruption and loss, there is no statutory requirement for care experienced young people to be offered therapeutic support, unless a child is adopted.

Care experienced children and young people have consistently been found to have much higher rates of mental health difficulties than the general population, and they are approximately four times more likely to have a mental health issue than children living in their birth families.²¹

With the impact of financial pressures taking more of an effect on local authorities, we have heard from some councils that there will be no therapeutic offer for careexperienced young people due to a lack of resources.

²⁰ <https://gov.wales/children-looked-after-local-authorities-april-2020-march-2021>

²¹ <https://www.iriss.org.uk/resources/outlines/care-experienced-children-and-young-peoples-mental-health>

Waiting lists for CAMHS are long²², and we know that many children and young people (irrespective of their care experienced status) do not qualify for a CAMHS referral. The missing middle is particularly prevalent for care experienced young people who may benefit hugely from support offered to both deal with existing mental health challenges as well as help develop resilience and prevent future problems.

There is also a cut-off in support for young people. One care experienced young person supported by Barnardo's told us that his local authority paid for private therapy for him until his 18th birthday, when he was no longer eligible for this and the therapy would have stopped, despite his ongoing need. In this particular case, the therapist being willing to see him for free initially, and then for a nominal charge once he was in work. This demonstrates the inequity and additional stress that care experienced young people face in trying to arrange their own access to therapeutic support. Barnardo's Cymru believes that this is completely unacceptable for a care experienced young person to deal with this at the age of 18 on top of the other challenges around being care experienced.

The transition at turning 18 is uneasy for many young people. Legislation on supporting care experienced young people up to the age of 25 has still not been laid in the Senedd, and practitioners note that without legislation and accompanying guidance it is difficult to hold all agencies into account with regards to providing adequate support to young people.

Multi-agency transition planning is key, but practitioners note that it is rarely applicable in practice. When children's services are no longer the lead agency, there is a lack of other agencies willing to take the lead and coordinate a young person's support. Barnardo's Cymru practitioners feel that they are often taking this role, despite being a voluntary organisation.

With regards to mental health, there are significant barriers in terms of a young person turning 18 with complex mental health needs but no formal diagnosis. At 18, a young person is expected to work, education or training, and although for some young people this is difficult due to their undiagnosed needs such as autism or ADHD, adult's services are unable to step in and provide support without a formal diagnosis. We would urge Welsh Government to review the transition at age 18 and how this can be smoothed on a number of fronts, particularly with regards to mental health and safeguarding support.

Our suggestion to the Children, Young People and Education Committee would be to consider recommending that Welsh Government introduce a statutory

²² Stats Wales data on how long waiting lists are

requirement for local authorities to offer therapeutic support to all care experienced young people up to the age of 25, and to provide financial support to local authorities to provide this.

3. After care: On-going support when young people leave care

Please outline a **maximum of three** top priorities for radical reform of the on-going support provided when young people leave care:

Priority 1:

Housing

There are a number of issues related to housing that Welsh Government should tackle as a matter of urgency.

- Care-experienced young people are often locked out of private rented accommodation due to a lack of a guarantor.

Care experienced young people do not transition to adulthood with the same level of support that many of us take for granted.

Young people tell us that they feel 'locked out' of private rented accommodation due to their inability to provide a guarantor to a private landlord, something that a young person would usually rely on a family member or family friend to do. We would urge Welsh Government to work with the private rented sector and with care-experienced young people to find a solution to this and ensure that, as corporate parents, Welsh Government is able to step in and help plug the gap where a guarantor is the difference between a young person taking steps towards independence and achieving their goals, and not.

- The lack of 'move-on' within supported lodgings and accommodation creates a backlog of young people who cannot access appropriate housing.

There is a lack of appropriate housing stock for young people who might have spent time in supported accommodation and are now ready to move onto independent living.

A young person would ideally spend a period of time living in supported housing (such as the Barnardo's Supported Lodgings Service and Transition and Training Flats in Swansea²³) before being supported to transition to their own accommodation. However, a lack of suitable housing (such as one-bedroom flats) for a young person to be moved on to, means that there can often be a long delay which blocks up the system.

²³ <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/what-we-do/services/barnardos-swanseas-supported-lodgings-service#:~:text=What%20we%20do,for%20young%20people%20to%20live.>

This affects both the ability of service providers to offer young people a place in supported lodgings or a training flat if they cannot ensure flow through the service, but also has a detrimental impact on the confidence and wellbeing of a young person who is ready to move on but cannot. Practitioners describe that young people, who have spent time in our supported accommodation provisions and made huge strides with their transition to independence, have at times regressed or lost confidence in their abilities, because they feel that the system is not demonstrating any confidence in them. This can also lead to young people making the decision to enter the private rented sector which is inevitably more expensive and less stable.

We would recommend that Welsh Government carry out a review into the provision of appropriate accommodation for care-experienced young people across Wales, identify the gaps in terms of capacity within appropriate supported accommodation provisions as well as options for move-on, and design an action plan to tackle this. Otherwise, we risk what is already an endemic issue from becoming even more entrenched and continuing to affect the outcomes of those young people in our care for years to come.

This should also be an opportunity to explore innovative approaches that could be adopted. For example, Barnardo's created Gap Homes²⁴ — a UK-wide initiative that will evidence the positive difference achieved with good quality housing and support for young people who are care experienced

The Gap Homes initiative has been developed in partnership with young people who either have been or are in the care system or who have had some experience of the care system in their lives at some point. The young people we support tell us that this project has provided them with a more certain future and has been a vital stepping-stone to independent living.

Priority 2:

Care leaver offer / tackling the cliff edge

Many young people describe a cliff edge of support, despite the role that Welsh Government and local authorities should continue to play in their lives post-18 as corporate parent.

Whilst their statutory needs are met, young people told Barnardo's that their wider wellbeing and long-term future was not holistically addressed. Barnardo's Swansea developed the BLOOM project to address this.

The aim of the service is to promote, safeguard and enhance the rights of young people to assist them to make a successful transition to adulthood and empower them to be heard and to reduce loneliness and anxiety, develop skills, confidence and self-esteem to help young people fulfil their potential. The

²⁴ ² <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/blog/giving-care-leavers-somewhere-safe-and-stable-call-home>

service works with care leavers 18+. There are three core elements of the project; life coaching, activity club and befriending & volunteer support.

Coaching gives young people the power to unlock their own potential for positive change, by providing them with the tools to build resilience, improve wellbeing, and understand themselves better. Coaching empowers young people to think about and move forward positively in their lives, by creating and working towards specific goals. The service also offers young people regular opportunities to get together to experience activities not easily accessed by care leavers alongside group events and regular clubs. Volunteers will help with activities and provide an adult mentor where this is considered more appropriate. Befrienders are members of the local community who befriend and provide ongoing assistance to vulnerable young people who have moved to independence from the 'looked-after' system. Peer mentors are slightly older care leavers who will guide their young people through the complex process of leaving care and moving to independent living by drawing on their own experiences.

Barnardo's Swansea is also working with Practice Solutions to deliver Believe, a project designed by care experienced young people to help care experienced young people meet their ambitions and expand their horizons. Care experienced young people in Swansea can apply for the opportunity to receive a range of experiences or support including a holiday to West Wales, free WiFi for a year, bills and budgeting advice, a new computer and much more. This provides opportunities to make a positive change to a young person's life.

We would recommend that Welsh Government work with expert partners and care experienced young people to develop a well-rounded care leaver's offer that works alongside the Basic Income Pilot to address the needs of young people, ensure that there is no longer a 'cliff edge' of support and that we fully meet our shared duty of acting as corporate parent to young people, beyond just offering the statutory minimum. We welcome Welsh Government's development of a new Corporate Parenting Charter which will revise guidance and clarify expectations and responsibilities, and would hope that any future Care Leaver Offer can be developed alongside the implementation of this.

The basic income pilot is a step forwards in meeting this need, and we look forward to seeing the outcomes of this over the coming years. However, we believe that holistic support for young people remains crucial and could enhance the effectiveness of schemes where young people benefit from better support from their corporate parents. The Believe pilot in Swansea works closely with local businesses to provide opportunities to care-experienced young people and is an innovative element of the scheme.

A particular cohort of care experienced young people struggle with the cliff edge in support: care experienced young parents and expectant parents.

If a care experienced parent is expecting their own child at a young age, there can be a significant amount of scrutiny of their readiness to parent. However, despite being the corporate parent of a care experienced young parent, instead of supporting these young people they are sometimes scrutinised their lack of ability to materially prepare for a baby.

If a 16/17/18 year old expecting a child, we would often expect their family and support networks to help them prepare – either financially or by sourcing hand-me-downs and other support. However, as corporate parents to a care experienced young person in the same position, local authorities often scrutinise a young person on their abilities to financially and materially prepare when assessing their ability to parent, instead of stepping in with an enhanced level of support.

Whilst there is good practice across many local authorities, there is no agreed standard to which care experienced young parents should be supported. We would recommend that Welsh Government consider doubling the setting up home allowance that is paid to young people where the young person in question is expecting a child or is a young parent, to reflect their greater need for material support and the Welsh Government's role in providing this as corporate parent.

In addition to this, we would call on Welsh Government to agree an approved national rate for a Setting Up Home Grant. Each local authority can agree the amount and it is our understanding that this has not been reviewed for some time. Given the rising cost-of-living and the price of goods increasing, this should be reviewed and implemented as a standard grant across Wales.

Priority 3:

Stability and developing support networks

A recent YouGov poll commissioned by Barnardo's found that 82% of adults surveyed believed it is very important for children to have consistent adults in their lives who support them through their childhood and beyond. Furthermore, 70% said they themselves had the support of family and friends to help them when they first moved out.²⁵ We know, however, that children in the care system often don't experience this level of consistency in their lives. Instead, they experience frequent change of home, school and social worker, before leaving care at 18 or sometimes younger with few people they can rely on.

²⁵ From Pillar to Post: How to achieve greater stability in the care system
<https://cms.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-05/From%20Pillar%20to%20Post.pdf>

We would urge Welsh Government to consider how young people transitioning to independence and semi-independence can be supported to develop their support networks as they are leaving care. This would help improve a whole range of outcomes for young people, and ensure that they have the support they need to manage the huge transitions in their lives.

One practical means of supporting this ambition would be to provide free public transport to all care-experienced young people in Wales up to the age of 25. We know that young people are often moved out of their communities, and that the financial barriers to travel are significant. This can prevent young people from maintaining their support networks by visiting friends and family, but also from establishing new ones as it can prevent access to education, training and skills. Taking steps to remove these barriers would help young people feel that they have better access to their communities and are more able to sustain the support networks that are so vital.

One example of an effective intervention is the Lifelong Links approach which is licensed by Family Rights Group. It involves expanding on the Family Group Conferencing (FGC) model to identify and facilitate relationships that a child wishes to maintain throughout their life. Barnardo's Cymru received a grant from the Welsh Government to implement the Lifelong Links model in Newport in March 2021 and has been running this project for almost two years.

Barnardo's Cymru has used Lifelong Links in Newport to great success in order to help care experienced young people to identify who can act as a support network in their lives and how to ensure that these networks support them as they move towards living independently.

Our research found that the use of Lifelong Links has taken a young person from having an average of four connections to an average of twelve connections following the process.

A support worker said:

What Impact did the Lifelong Links work have on the young person/family?

"A real transformation with the young person having no idea who his family really were and having limited contact with them for many years to establishing real connection and identity with them and himself. Real positive turn around in all aspects of his life since establishing a contact with Family."

A young person said:

"I wanted to see my brother. I love seeing him. It's the best. We are much happier and it's the best for everyone."

Children and practitioners alike reported that children who engaged with a Lifelong Links plan have an increased sense of identity and belonging as a result of the process.

This process can involve drawing together family members, existing and former teachers, social workers and anyone else who has had a lasting impact on the young person's life, to give them a supportive circle.

We would recommend that Welsh Government consider investing in Lifelong Links across Wales and ensuring that all care experienced young people have the opportunity to benefit from this, as well as exploring other means for helping young people develop their support networks as they begin to transition into independence.

4. Anything else

Do you have anything else you would like to tell us?