

CYPM14 Voice From Care Cymru

Senedd Cymru | Welsh Parliament

Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg | Children, Young People and Education Committee

Plant a phobl ifanc sydd ar yr ymylon | Children and Young People on the margins

Ymateb gan Voice From Care Cymru | Evidence from Voice From Care Cymru

Please set out any views on missing children below.

You may wish to consider:

- **Nature and scale of the issue and regional variations.**
- **At risk groups: including the impact of care experience and out of area placements.**
- **Practice: issues such as information sharing and data collection.**
- **Policy: the effectiveness of devolved policy and practice responses, including Welsh Government oversight. Whether there is effective read across to relevant Welsh Government strategies.**
- **Devolved and UK powers: how joined up is the interface between devolved and non-devolved policy such as criminal and youth justice.**

Our responses are based on the lived experience of the care experienced children and young people we work with and support.

There are a number of issues relating to children going missing that they wish to highlight.

Children being cared for in residential settings and to a certain extent foster care are often reported to the police as 'missing' when they are just 'being teenagers' - hanging about with friends in the park, going back to a friend's house and forgetting to tell their carers. Young people say that they would like carers to act as a parent would in these circumstances - phone round friends, drive over to the park etc, before the police are called. They find the police picking them up from a friend's house for example, stigmatising and upsetting. They understand that some young people are very vulnerable and that for them the police might need to be called straight away, but not for everyone. Their suggestion is that carers are empowered to be a bit less risk averse, enabled to use their own judgement and not to over react.

Anecdotally there appears to be a particular issue with young people running away from residential settings when they are placed far away from home. This is particularly true of young people whose homes are in England and who are placed in residential care in rural Wales,

Young people have very mixed views about return to home interviews. Some welcomed the opportunity to discuss their reasons for leaving the place where they were being cared for, particularly when they were able to do that with an independent person. Others found the interviews intrusive and stigmatising. Many questioned the point of them. "What was the point of me doing interview after interview saying that I'm not happy there and I didn't want to stay when no one took any notice and nothing changed. I just kept doing what I could do - running away from there."

All young people felt that these interviews should be optional, and that children and young people should have a choice of who did the interviews.

It's clear that practice isn't consistent, and that young people's experiences vary depending on where they live.

There is a need for greater co-ordination and better sharing of information between agencies.

Above all, we need to listen to children who keep going missing and act on what they tell us, and this isn't happening everywhere

I am aware of what could turn out to be good practice in the Cardiff area, with police, social services and other agencies meeting regularly to co-ordinate an approach to missing children. It might be worth the Committee taking a look at that. I heard of the work when it was just starting a year ago, so it might be useful to see if it's working and if it's making a difference

Please set out any views on children and young people who are victims of criminal exploitation below.

You may wish to consider:

- **Nature and scale across Wales and regional variations (e.g. traditional, drug related, sexual, financial).**
 - **At risk groups: including care experience, children experiencing trauma in the home and children not enrolled in mainstream education.**
 - **Policy: The effectiveness of devolved policy including Welsh Government oversight. Whether there effective read across to relevant WG strategies such as Child Sexual Exploitation.**
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- **Practice: Approaches to prevention, community resilience, early intervention, support provided and exit strategies for victims. Practice issues such as information sharing and data collection.**
 - **Devolved and UK powers: How joined up is the interface between devolved and non-devolved policy such as criminal and youth justice? Are there any points of tension between criminal law and safeguarding?**
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We have supported young people who have become the victims of criminal exploitation, including 'cuckooing' and sexual exploitation.

Some young people in the care system or having recently left tell us that they are very lonely and isolated. They want to belong, and criminals can exploit this. Some young people have also told us that being actively involved in criminal activity makes them feel safer "If was staying at mine the others would leave me alone. I knew what he was doing (selling drugs) but I felt safe with him there. He was ok with me, at least at first." (cuckooing victim).

The most effective way to address this is for children and young people to be cared for in a way that is loving and supportive and trauma informed, so that they do not end up vulnerable and isolated. Much more effective support is needed for young people leaving the care system. Early intervention is key.

There are still huge challenges to be faced in getting agencies to treat these children as vulnerable young people at risk, not as criminals. While there have been some improvements in recent years there is still a tendency to treat these young people as people making bad choices, not as victims.

For example, during lockdown we were supporting a young woman who had been at the edge of prostitution and had issues with substance abuse. During lockdown it was harder for her exploiters to access her and we tried very hard to get support for her at that time, from housing, from mental health services and from social services, but no support was forthcoming. When lockdowns were lifted her exploiters accessed her again, and her situation became worse and worse. Since she had turned 18 social services treated her as a young adult free to make bad decisions. Mental health waiting lists were impossibly long and because of the chaos in her life she missed appointments and they refused to treat her. She wasn't able to maintain a tenancy. The only agency that took her situation seriously was the police, and they did try to protect her, but there was a limit to what they could do without co-operation from other agencies. Sadly, she eventually took her own life. This is an extreme example, but not my any ,means unique.

A change in culture across agencies is very much needed, as is greater co-operation and effective exchange of information.

Please set out any views on other groups of children on the margins.

You may wish to identify other groups of children “on the margins”. These would be groups of children in circumstances that require a specific response from children’s services or other statutory providers and for which there are concerns about the current policy or practice.

If you have anything else you wish to share with us, please do so below.

We would be happy to support the Committee to engage with care experienced young people who have experience of these issues if this would be of assistance to the Committee further on in the process