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 Llamau | Evidence from Llamau

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.**

Llamau's Missing Children Service:

Llamau's Missing Children Service, in collaboration with Dyfed Powys Police Service, plays a pivotal role in addressing the pressing issue of missing children and young people in Wales. The statistics revealing that one child is reported missing every hour in Wales underscore the urgent need for comprehensive support and intervention strategies, particularly for care-experienced children who are disproportionately affected. Llamau's targeted services fill a critical gap in the system by providing independent mediation and debriefing for young people and children who go missing in Gwent and Dyfed Powys.

The collaboration between Llamau and Dyfed Powys Police Service allows for a multi-agency approach to addressing missing children cases, ensuring that a range of expertise and resources are available to support vulnerable individuals. Llamau's services go beyond simply responding to incidents of missing children; they aim to identify the underlying reasons for going missing and address the root causes of vulnerability, such as experiences of trauma, exploitation, or criminal behavior.

In Q3 - Carmarthen having the overall highest number of referrals with 39 to our Llamau and Dyfed Powys Police Service. Of the referrals received Carmarthenshire was the highest with 18 recorded as male, 21 female and Ceredigion showing 1 transgender. There has been an increase of 14 year old MISPER of 32% showing as 28 missing in Q2 and 37 in Q3.

•	In Q3, 24% of MISPER wanted to be with friends/peer pressure with 37 cases.

•	12% of young people were MISPER due to not being happy/issues in school with 19 cases recorded. Which is an increase of 26% from the second quarter.

•	11% of MISPER's said it was due to arguments at home/pushing boundaries with 17, with 10% needing time out/away.

Pembroke has had consistently the highest number of cases of young people who were experiencing arguments at home with 9 cases recorded. Powys shows consistently the highest number for wanting time with friends/peer pressure with 11 cases. Carmarthen shows consistently the highest number of cases of young people who experienced not being happy/issues in school with 13 recorded.

The insights gained through Llamau's debriefing services are invaluable in understanding the complexities of missing children cases and tailoring interventions to meet the specific needs of each individual. The finding that 25% of all referrals for debrief by Llamau display signs of possible child sexual exploitation highlights the urgent need for targeted support and safeguarding measures to protect vulnerable children from harm.

Moreover, Llamau's interventions not only aim to prevent repeated instances of going missing but also work towards reducing the risk of homelessness in the future. By addressing the underlying factors contributing to vulnerability, such as family breakdown, substance misuse, or lack of stable accommodation, Llamau's services play a vital role in promoting long-term stability and well-being for young people and children.

However, despite the invaluable work being done by Llamau's Missing Children Service, the demand for their services continues to outstrip available resources. Increased funding is essential to expand and sustain these critical interventions, ensuring that vulnerable children and young people receive the support and protection they urgently need. By investing in Llamau's services, policymakers can demonstrate their commitment to safeguarding the rights and well-being of all children and young people in Wales, particularly those who are most at risk of exploitation, homelessness, and harm.

Early Intervention and Prevention:

Early intervention and prevention programmes are essential components of efforts to address the issue of missing children effectively. Programs like Llamau's Upstream

Cymru play a crucial role in identifying and mitigating risk factors that may lead to children being homeless and going missing. By intervening early and providing targeted support to children and families facing challenges such as family breakdown, substance abuse, or domestic violence, these programs can help prevent situations from escalating to the point where a child feels compelled to run away or go missing.

Upstream Cymru focuses on addressing the root causes of vulnerability and providing holistic support to children and families in need. This may include providing access to counselling and mental health services, offering practical assistance with housing or financial stability, or connecting families with community resources and support networks. By addressing underlying issues and strengthening protective factors within families and communities, early intervention programs can reduce the likelihood of children going missing and improve overall outcomes for children and families.

In addition to targeted interventions, education plays a vital role in preventing missing children cases by empowering children with the knowledge and resources they need to seek help when they feel unsafe or at risk. Awareness-raising initiatives in schools can provide children with information about personal safety, healthy relationships, and where to turn for support if they experience abuse, neglect, or exploitation. By fostering open communication and equipping children with the skills to recognise and respond to danger, these initiatives can help empower children to assert their rights and protect themselves from harm.

Since 2020 Upstream Cymru has surveyed over 4,460 pupils across Wales. 14% of young people surveyed were identified as high risk of homelessness. The survey also found: 65 % of these high risk young people were unknown to any support services. 13 % reported high levels of conflict at home. 3 % felt unsafe at home. Post-screening, the Upstream Cymru team deploys its targeted specialist support to those young people and their families identified as high and medium risk of homelessness. The impact of interventions are hugely positive with; 91 % of young people at high risk of homelessness have been supported to remain at home when it was safe to do so. 84 % of families met their personal support goals including spending more time together, and being better at talking to each other to resolve issues. 51 % of young people felt more optimistic about their future. 43 % of young people improved their attendance at school. The strategic approach of early identification alongside targeted intervention, exemplified by Upstream Cymru, proves how prevention can lead the way, allowing more young people and their families to safely stay together and build a positive future. This not only safeguards their wellbeing but also eliminates the significant costs incurred by the use of often unsuitable temporary accommodation if they were to experience homelessness — and these costs have doubled in Wales over the last five years, totalling over £40 million.

Moreover, education can also play a preventative role by promoting social and emotional learning, resilience, and positive coping strategies among children and young people. By teaching children skills such as problem-solving, decision-making, and conflict resolution, education can help build their capacity to navigate challenges and adversity, reducing their vulnerability to situations where they may be at risk of going missing. Furthermore, education can also serve as a platform for promoting diversity, inclusion, and acceptance, creating a supportive and inclusive environment for LGBTQ+ youth and other marginalised groups who may be at increased risk of homelessness and going missing.

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.**

- **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?**

Nature and scale:

The issue of children and young people who are victims of criminal exploitation is a significant concern across Wales, with various forms of exploitation prevalent in different regions. Traditional forms of exploitation, such as involvement in gangs or organised crime, may be more pronounced in urban areas with higher levels of social deprivation and gang activity. These children and young people may be coerced or manipulated into criminal activities, including drug trafficking, theft, or violence, often as a means of survival or to gain a sense of belonging within their communities.

Drug-related exploitation, particularly through county lines operations, is a growing concern in both urban and rural areas of Wales. Criminal gangs exploit vulnerable

children and young people, often from disadvantaged backgrounds, to transport and sell drugs across county boundaries. These individuals may be subject to threats, intimidation, and violence, as well as grooming tactics involving drugs, money, and promises of protection. The scale of drug-related exploitation can vary depending on factors such as local drug markets, transportation routes, and law enforcement strategies.

Sexual exploitation is another significant issue affecting children and young people across Wales, with victims often targeted by predators who exploit their vulnerabilities for sexual gratification or financial gain. This form of exploitation may occur online or through grooming tactics in person, and victims may be coerced into engaging in sexual activities or pornography production. Regional variations in the prevalence of sexual exploitation may exist due to factors such as access to technology, social norms, and levels of awareness and reporting.

Financial exploitation, including coercion into criminal activities such as fraud or theft, is also a concern for children and young people in Wales. Perpetrators may exploit their victims' financial vulnerabilities, lack of employment opportunities, or desire for material possessions to manipulate them into illegal activities. This form of exploitation can have long-lasting consequences for victims, including criminal records, financial debt, and ongoing involvement in criminal networks.

At Risk Groups:

Children and young people who are victims of criminal exploitation often come from at-risk groups, including those with care experience, children experiencing trauma in the home, and those not enrolled in mainstream education. These vulnerable populations are particularly susceptible to exploitation due to a range of factors that increase their vulnerability and reduce their access to protective factors.

Children in care or those with care experience are among the most vulnerable to exploitation. The lack of stable familial support networks and the disruptions in their lives can leave them searching for belonging and stability, which perpetrators may exploit. Additionally, children in care may face challenges in building trusting relationships with adults and may be more likely to be targeted by predatory individuals who exploit their vulnerabilities for financial gain or other purposes.

Children experiencing trauma in the home, such as abuse, neglect, or domestic violence, are also at heightened risk of exploitation. Trauma can impact a child's sense of safety, self-esteem, and ability to trust others, making them more susceptible to manipulation and coercion by perpetrators. Moreover, the presence of trauma may lead to difficulties in forming healthy relationships and seeking help, further exacerbating their vulnerability to exploitation.

Children not enrolled in mainstream education, including those who are truant or have dropped out of school, are another at-risk group for criminal exploitation. These

children may lack the protective factors provided by schools, such as supervision, support from teachers and peers, and access to resources and opportunities.

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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.

There are several other groups of children who find themselves on the margins and in need of specific support and interventions from children's services or other statutory providers. Some of these groups include:

Children with disabilities: Children with disabilities often face unique challenges related to accessing education, healthcare, and social services. They may require specialised support to address their physical, cognitive, or developmental needs and to ensure their full inclusion and participation in society. Concerns may arise regarding the availability and quality of services, as well as barriers to accessibility and discrimination.

Children from minority ethnic backgrounds: Children from minority ethnic backgrounds may experience discrimination, racism, and cultural barriers that impact their well-being and opportunities. They may face challenges in accessing appropriate support services, navigating the education system, and maintaining their cultural identity. There may be concerns about the cultural competence of service providers and the adequacy of support for addressing the specific needs of these children and their families.

Children affected by parental incarceration: Children with incarcerated parents face numerous challenges, including stigma, emotional distress, and disruptions to family life. They may experience difficulties in maintaining relationships with their incarcerated parent, coping with the financial and practical impacts of imprisonment, and accessing support services. Concerns may arise regarding the lack of targeted support for these children and the need for greater recognition of their unique needs within policy and practice.

Children of asylum seekers and refugees: Children of asylum seekers and refugees often face multiple layers of vulnerability, including displacement, trauma, and uncertainty about their future. They may require support with language acquisition, cultural adjustment, and access to education and healthcare services. Concerns may arise regarding the adequacy of support for addressing the specific needs of refugee and asylum-seeking children, including access to legal representation, mental health services, and social integration programs.

Children living in poverty: Children living in poverty are at increased risk of experiencing poor health outcomes, educational attainment, and social exclusion. They may face barriers to accessing essential services, nutritious food, and safe housing. Concerns may arise regarding the impact of austerity measures, welfare reforms, and systemic inequalities on the well-being of children and families living in poverty, as well as the adequacy of support for addressing their needs.

Addressing the needs of these marginalised groups of children requires a comprehensive and inclusive approach that recognises the intersecting nature of their vulnerabilities and identities. It is essential for policymakers and service providers to prioritise the voices and experiences of these children and their families, involve them in decision-making processes, and develop tailored interventions that address their specific needs and circumstances. Additionally, there is a need for greater collaboration and coordination between agencies and sectors to ensure that support services are accessible, culturally responsive, and effective in promoting the rights and well-being of all children.