



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

# Improving Outcomes for Children Programme

## Legacy report

Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.  
This document is also available in Welsh.

## Deputy Minister's Foreword



I am delighted to introduce the Legacy Report for the Welsh Government's Improving Outcomes for Children programme, which ran from 2016 until 2021 and overseen by my Ministerial Advisory Group.

I would first like to acknowledge the invaluable contribution made by former Senedd Member, David Melding, and Dan Pitt in their roles as Chair and Vice-Chair of the Group respectively. Their commitment and insight over the last five years has been instrumental in helping progress the Improving Outcomes for Children programme.

When we started this journey, David's long term championing of children's rights fitted perfectly with the priorities of the programme and having Dan, a care experienced person as Vice Chair, has helped ensure a clear focus on the issues that matter to care experienced children and young people. I also want to thank all the members of the Group as well for their support and advice. We could not have delivered the programme so successfully without their help, expertise and dedication.

I would like to highlight a few examples of what the programme has achieved:

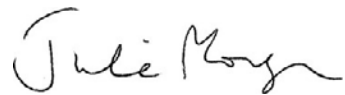
- Establishing the St David's Day Fund to support care experienced young people transition to independent living.
- Developing and expanding edge of care services in every local authority.
- Rolling out the Reflect service to support women who have experienced the compulsory removal of a child.
- Expanding the offer of Personal Advisers up to age 25.
- Encouraging Local Authority Apprenticeship and Traineeship schemes for care leavers.
- Developing national standards for Independent Reviewing Officers and Independent Visitors.
- Supporting implementation of the National Fostering Framework and the development of an exciting national brand that will bolster foster placements.
- Investing £15m in the Integrated Care Fund to support children and families at the edge of care, reunification activity and therapeutic services.
- Working with Regional Partnership Boards to develop therapeutic provision for children with complex needs.

- Agreeing an approach for strengthening corporate parenting across the public sector.
- Developing an integrated approach to improving educational attainment for looked after children.

The report ably describes the journey we have been on and the distance travelled. There remains much to be done and the report highlights the key transformational projects still in train which we will build upon to shape our children's services for the future.

Recovering from the impact of COVID-19 is a significant challenge. Children's Social Services across Wales have shown much resilience and stability during the pandemic. This is due to the huge effort of local authorities, their staff and carers and the third sector in providing continued support to children and families. We know that continuing that support and particularly ensuring we collectively look after the mental health and wellbeing of care experienced children as we come out of the pandemic is crucial.

I hope you enjoy reading the Legacy Report, celebrating the achievements of the past five years while considering the priorities it identifies to be taken forward in the new Senedd term.



**Julie Morgan MS**

Deputy Minister for Social Services,

## Chair's Foreword



Continuing to improve outcomes for children in care will be one of the key priorities for the 6th Senedd. This duty of care extends also to care leavers who need effective support to secure a fulfilling, independent and productive life. Care experienced young people consistently gain lower attainment than their peers and are much more vulnerable to adverse outcomes that stifle their potential. Too many children enter care which means that family support is often lacking where it could achieve best results.

The Ministerial Advisory Group has over the last 5 years advised on key policy developments to tackle these challenges and the most prominent are described in this legacy report. Importantly we also list the areas where progress has been uneven or still lacks the necessary pace. Another important aspect of the Ministerial Advisory Group's work has been research and data analysis so that knowledge gaps can be addressed and more effective approaches identified. And the Group has also been keen to identify and commend best practice and consider how it can be disseminated and made more systematic.

The Ministerial Advisory Group has been based on teamwork and stakeholder participation. The third sector

has been particularly generous in its commitment to the work programme and I would like to mention the role of Voices from Care in particular. Dan Pitt, a care experienced young person from Voices, was our outstanding Deputy Chair and he ensured the Group sought effective participation from those in care and care leavers. The public sector from Local Authorities and health organisations to the police and many other agencies also made a huge contribution. Without a dedicated secretariat, the "engine room", provided by Welsh Government officials our work would have not been possible at all.

We have worked with a number of Welsh Government Ministers over the last 5 years, most recently Julie Morgan MS. The eagerness of the Welsh Government to listen, reflect and act on our advice was key to maintaining the effectiveness of the Group and the Improving Outcomes for Children programme.

It has been an honour to chair such a dedicated group of stakeholders committed to improving outcomes for care experienced children and young people. I hope you find this legacy report useful and a candid account of what we have learned, achieved and although started left incomplete.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David Melding". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline.

**David Melding**  
Chair, Improving Outcomes for  
Children Ministerial Advisory Group

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# 1. Purpose of the Legacy Report

The Improving Outcomes for Children programme was established in 2016 to develop a national approach to improve outcomes for care experienced children and identify what early intervention and preventative action can be taken to help reduce the numbers of children taken into care.

The programme has been in place for the course of this Assembly Term (2016-2021) and has been supported by a cross-government and cross-sector Ministerial Advisory Group, chaired by David Melding. The group's broad membership has consisted of all the key leaders and agencies involved in the lives of care experienced children, including local authority children's service, the third sector, the Children's Commissioner and representatives from across health, education, youth justice, family justice and housing.

The aim of this report is to describe the journey that has been undertaken over the last five years. The Improving Outcomes for Children programme has been ambitious and wide reaching, involving short, medium and long-term projects designed to shape the future landscape for children's social services. As we near the end of this Assembly Term, the Improving Outcomes for Children programme will draw to a close. This report sets out the achievements that have been made and the impact these have had upon care experienced children, the services in place to support them and the workforce.

However, the journey of improvement does not end here. Professional practice and public policy continually evolves and changes in response to new research, initiatives and developments across children's social care and family support. Further work is needed and certain aspects will inevitably continue. This report also sets out some of the longer term transformational projects that are still in train and the continuing plans that are in place for their completion.

These 'legacy' items will require continued focus in the next Assembly Term and are proposed as priority areas that will need pursuing by the new administration and any strategic/stakeholder group that will follow the MAG.

## 2. Vision for Care Experienced Children

Historically, research has consistently shown a strong relationship between rates of child protection and children in care in Wales and deprivation in local areas. Often the work of children's social services has been concentrated in Wales' poorest communities. Outcomes for looked after children have generally been poor. Care experienced children are less likely to achieve good educational qualifications, have greater health and housing needs, are more likely to become involved in substance misuse and come into contact with the criminal justice system.

Our statutory framework for improving outcomes for care experienced children and those at the edge of care is set out in Part 6 of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014. This provides greater emphasis on diverting children from care and providing support to enable families to stay together. For children already in care, this means making every effort to re-unify families when appropriate, in the interests of the child and when it is safe to do so.

The Welsh Government set out its vision and key priorities for delivery in this Assembly Term in its Programme for Government – ***Taking Wales Forward (2016)***, which commits to:

- **Examine ways of ensuring looked after children enjoy the same life chances as other children and if necessary reform the way they are looked after.**
- **Work to reduce unnecessary use of care, building on the work of the Integrated Family Support Service to work with and support the most vulnerable children and families in Wales.**

These commitments were reinforced in our national strategy ***Prosperity for All (2017)***, which includes social care as one of five priority areas, with actions to:

- **Raise the educational attainment and improve the life chances of children in care, adopting a child centred approach, through the collaboration of education, social services and others.**
- **Strengthen edge of care services to provide families with timely support to reduce the numbers needing care provision and provide assistance in the key transitional phase post 16 to access further education, jobs and housing for all those leaving care.**

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 sets the framework in which public bodies in Wales must work together to improve the well-being of Wales, working in an integrated and collaborative way, engaging with people and communities to take account of the long-term and to help prevent problems occurring or getting worse.

It is broadly recognised that social services alone cannot improve the opportunities and life chances of those who have experienced care. Rather an effective cross-government approach is required, working across the whole public sector, with each agency owning its responsibilities towards supporting children who are looked after as core business.

## 3. Governance Arrangements

### The Improving Outcomes for Children programme

The programme was established in direct response to the vision and challenges within *Taking Wales Forward and Prosperity for All*; as a programme for change to deliver our vision and improve services for children and families in need of help and support in Wales.

**Initial activity (Phase 1) was undertaken in 2015-16.** This work focussed on the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer and Independent Visitors, local authority processes and risk management strategies, proposals for a National Fostering Framework, and prevention and early intervention support. Building on the evidence set out in Phase 1, the I04C programme was established to deliver against 3 broad priorities:

- Preventing children entering care and early intervention;
- Improving outcomes for children already in care, and;
- Supporting care leavers to successful futures and independent living.

### Ministerial Advisory Group (MAG)

To provide the focus and drive required, a Ministerial Advisory Group was set up to drive the programme forward and provide expert advice to Welsh Ministers on a wide range of strategic and operational issues concerning improving outcomes for children.

In recognition of the cross-party consensus within the Assembly to improve outcomes for care experienced children, David Melding,

was invited to chair the group. David has been a strong advocate for care experienced children throughout his time in the Assembly and has developed significant expertise as Chair of the cross-party group for looked after children.

The MAG has had a key role in overseeing policy development, helping to identify potential gaps, generating ideas, providing advice about what appears to work best in practice and monitoring the impact of the change programme. The Group has consistently met on a quarterly or termly basis.

Collaboration has been fundamental to the Group. Two work streams have been chaired by a local authority head of children's services, supported by a third sector vice-chair. A third workstream has been chaired by a representative from the third sector, supported by a head of children's service vice chair. An Operational Group was established, made up of the three work stream Chairs and Vice-Chairs, Social Care Wales and Improving Outcomes for Children team members. The Group provides operational oversight of the MAG work programme, including the interfaces across work streams and the delivery of funding allocated to support work areas. Day-to-day management of the programme has fallen to the Improving Outcomes for Children team within the Welsh Government's Social Services and Integration Directorate.

The MAG has been instrumental in developing a sense of momentum and enthusiasm behind the programme with organisations and members of the Group taking ownership and accountability for the work programme's delivery. From an early stage, All Wales Heads of



Children's Services adopted the Improving Outcomes for Children programme as its own, helping to drive activity at a local government and shaping service delivery and social worker practice.

The wide membership and senior leadership of the MAG reflects the broad corporate parenting responsibilities that sit across public services and the breadth of services in place to support care experienced children. The MAG has provided a single forum where partners from across sectors and policy portfolios can meet at a strategic level, discuss operational issues and improve partnership arrangements and interfaces between services.

The MAG has been active in bringing key issues to the fore and helped raise the profile of looked after children at a strategic and policy level. The programme management approach adopted by the Group's has provided a platform upon which policy development for children's services has continued to be a top Government priority, as evidenced by the *Improving Outcomes for Children* Cabinet Paper in 20181.

**Phase 2: Framework for Action (2017-2020)** – At its inception, the Improving Outcomes for Children programme consisted of 25 work areas covering research, pilot projects, policy developments and improvements to professional practice. These were set out in the Group's *Framework for Action (2017–2020)* which described the vision for ensuring the life chances of looked after children are the same as for other children.

**Phase 3: Refreshed Work Programme (2019-2021)** – Over the course of this Assembly Term, as areas of work have been completed and new priorities have emerged, the Improving Outcomes for Children programme has evolved and new areas have been taken on, subject to the agreement of the Ministerial Advisory Group. As a result, a shorter and more strategic Phase 3 work programme was developed in 2019 focussing on 12 key areas that are to be delivered that will enable effective implementation and improved outcomes for care experienced children.

**Activity has sat under 3 work streams:**

1. Safely Reducing the Numbers of Children in Need of Care
2. Providing and Commissioning a flexible, affordable and sufficient range of High Quality Placements
3. Supporting Best Possible Journeys through Care and Into Adulthood

In 2018, a Welsh Government Internal Audit of the Improving Outcomes Children programme and governance arrangements was undertaken, which received the highest assurance rating.

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1. <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-02/improving-outcomes.pdf>

## 4. Research and the evolving evidence base

Over the past couple of years, there have been a number of significant reports exploring the increase in numbers of children in care.

**Care Crisis Review (2018)** – The Family Rights Group undertook a large scale England and Wales review into the reasons for the rise in care proceedings and number of children in care. The Review team worked closely with Welsh stakeholders and members of the MAG so that the Welsh landscape could be appropriately reflected in the report.

*The Care Crisis Review* was published in June 2018, highlighted the sense of crisis that is felt by many young people, families and those working within the system because of increased use of court proceedings<sup>2</sup>.

In Wales and in England, the number of care order applications reached record levels in 2017 and the number of looked after children was at its highest since the Children Act 1989. The number of children in care has been rising steadily since the early 1990s, except for a period in England in the mid-2000s. Key figures in the family justice sector and in the children’s social care sector have been voicing concern that the care system is under pressure. They point out:

- the growing number of families facing the stresses of poverty;
- the need to help people at early stages of family difficulties to prevent problems getting worse and to support children and those caring for them.

The *Born into care Wales* report was published in October 2019 and highlighted many of the challenges that we have been looking to address through the Improving Outcomes for Children programme, including the variation in numbers and patterns of cases across local authority and local family justice board areas. It found that:

- Between 2011 and 2018, infants comprised 30% of the overall population of children involved in s.31 care proceedings in Wales.
- Between 2016 and 2018, 49% of new-borns were “subsequent infants”; that is their mothers had already appeared in care proceedings concerning an older sibling.
- Since 2012, there has been a decrease in the proportion of new-borns placed for adoption since 2012.
- In 2018, 64% of new-borns were subject to care orders at the close of proceedings.
- Over time, the family courts are making far less use of the range of orders available under the Children Act 1989, for new-borns and infants.

**Wales Centre for Public Policy** published its *Analysis of factors contributing to high rates of care* in March 2019 which sets out to explain why rates of looked after children are high in Wales<sup>3</sup> and the impact of factors such as:

- deprivation;

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2. The Care Crisis Review: Factors contributing to national increases in the numbers of looked after children and applications for care orders:

[https://www.frg.org.uk/images/Care\\_Crisis/Care-Crisis-Review-Factors-report-FINAL.pdf](https://www.frg.org.uk/images/Care_Crisis/Care-Crisis-Review-Factors-report-FINAL.pdf)

3. The Wales Centre for Public Policy *Analysis of factors contributing to high rates of care*:

<http://www.wcpp.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/190715-Analysis-of-Factors-Contributing-to-High-Rates-of-Care-REVISED.pdf>

- the effects of the ‘trigger trio’ (domestic abuse, parental substance misuse and parental mental ill health) on parenting capacity and resources;
- differences in policy and practice between local authorities, including the approach taken to providing care and support; and
- decisions made in family courts.

WCPP is also undertaking research looking at the variance of looked after children rates amongst local authorities and exploring the values, decision making and views of social workers which impact on the variation in looked after children rates. A survey was issued to all social workers, team managers/deputies, senior managers, heads of services and directors of social services in Wales. The findings from this piece of work and the research will be published shortly.

**COVID-19** – The coronavirus pandemic has presented enormous challenges to vulnerable families and placed considerable pressure on children’s services, the family courts and our third sector partners. Research shows the pandemic has exacerbated inequality and intensified already difficult situations for vulnerable children and families. It is likely that the impact of COVID-19 will be long lasting and serve to exacerbate the difficulties and challenges which many children faced before the onset of the pandemic.

The impact of the pandemic on mental health has been a key issue since the start of the pandemic. The United Nations highlighted particular concern for “frontline healthcare workers, older people, adolescents and young people, those with pre-existing mental health conditions and those caught up in conflict and crisis” (2020). Officials are continuing to monitor surveys in relation to the impact of the pandemic on mental health and well-being. The most recent findings suggest that young people are continuing to report worse

mental health and wellbeing than before lockdown, with anxiety remaining higher throughout.

From the early days of the pandemic, Welsh Government has collected weekly data from local authorities in respect of care and support for care experienced children and the impact upon care leavers. From this data, we have learned about various pressures in the system and sought assurances as necessary from sector partners holding the statutory duties for these children. In addition, the Children’s Commissioner for Wales led two ‘Coronavirus and Me’ surveys which have been useful sources of information in respect of how children and young people in general are feeling and work undertaken by CASCADE, NSPCC, Voices from Care and others has been equally informative and enlightening. Responding to the COVID-19 and mitigating the impact of the pandemic will be a key priority in the new Senedd term.

## 5. Delivery

### Workstream 1: Safely Reducing the Numbers of Children in Need of Care

Tackling the continuing rise in numbers of looked after children in Wales has been a key priority throughout the course of this Government. Over this period, we have seen continued growing pressure placed on children's services and the family court system, with workloads remaining high and resources ever more constrained. Our close work and engagement with the Ministerial Advisory Group and stakeholders has highlighted the need for strengthened partnership working in the provision of services which help keep families together, de-escalate crisis so to prevent children from coming into contact with statutory services.

#### **This engagement helped shape the following investments:**

**Edge of Care Services** – Since 2017-18, Welsh Government has provided £5m recurrent funding to local authorities to establish or enhance existing edge of care services to help stem the increasing numbers of children entering the care system. All 22 local authorities now have services in place, supporting over 3,600 children to remain within the family unit in 2017–18 alone.

**Reflect** – Following additional recurrent funding announced in 2017–18, £850k was provided to support the roll out of Reflect across all 7 regions in Wales. The Reflect project was developed to engage and support women who have experienced the compulsory removal of a child to the care system to help prevent further incidences.

Reflect aims to break the cycle of children being taken into care and give women the opportunity to develop new skills and responses that can help create a more positive future. Parents are encouraged to understand their past, to work with their present and to achieve their future goals. In the first 6 months of 2020–21, Reflect worked with 243 parents whose children had been placed in the care system.

**Integrated Care Fund** – Since 2019–20, Welsh Government has allocated £15m annually to Regional Partnership Boards via the Integrated Care Fund. The Ministerial Advisory Group has been instrumental in advising how new monies can be targeted at areas of highest priority. These include projects established to help children on the edge of care and prevent them becoming looked after, as well as projects to provide support for children who are care experienced and/or adopted. There are around 40 projects which are covering areas such as:

- Reunification and repatriation work and returning children nearer to home.
- Family support to prevent family breakdown and children coming into care.
- Family group conferencing to prevent children coming into care.
- Therapeutic support to help children with emotional and behavioural needs.
- Support to prevent family/placement breakdown.
- Training and awareness for perinatal mental health.

Following changes made to the statutory guidance in relation to Part 9 of the Act<sup>4</sup>, the definition of children with complex needs now comprises:

- children with disabilities and/or illness;
- children who are care experienced;
- children who in need of care and support;
- children who are on the edge of care/at risk of becoming looked after;
- children with emotional and behavioural needs.

## Appreciative Inquiry

To reinforce moves towards greater prevention, members of the Ministerial Advisory Group volunteered their time to undertake an Appreciative Inquiry at six local authorities across Wales in 2018. The Inquiry sought to identify effective approaches to family support and strategies for managing risk which help reduce safely the numbers of children in need of care<sup>5</sup>.

The findings from the Inquiry have been useful in determining how the Welsh Government provides future investment to strengthen support for vulnerable families whose children are at risk of entering the care system and to provide additional therapeutic services<sup>6</sup>. This had particular influence on the shape of the additional £15 million investment via the Integrated Care Fund to help reduce the need for care and more intensive therapeutic services and in helping to strengthen the response and activity of Regional Partnership Boards (RPBs) in respect of Children's Services.

## LAC Reduction Expectations

To drive a particular focus on reducing the number of looked after children in Wales, in 2019 the First Minister asked for a targeted approach to be developed with local authorities. The First Minister has been clear that too many children are removed from their families into the care system and there is a need to redress the imbalance between placing children in care and the provision of support to keep families together. The First Minister set the following priority areas for reduction:

- The number of children in care.
- The number of children placed out of county.
- The number of children placed out of Wales.
- The number of children removed from parents with a Learning Disability.

Local authorities have also been asked to clearly disaggregate from the total number of children in care, the number of:

- Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC).
- Children placed with own parents or other person with parental responsibility; and,
- Children in foster placements with a relative or friend.

Officials worked closely with all local authorities to develop reduction expectation plans over a 3 year period (2019-2021). The Welsh Local Government Association and the Association of Directors of Social Services have co-operated with Welsh Government on this agenda.

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4 [gov.wales/partnership-arrangements-care-and-support-guidance](https://gov.wales/partnership-arrangements-care-and-support-guidance)

5. Ministerial Advisory Group, December 2018: Family Support Services in Six Local Authorities

6. Ministerial Advisory Group Reducing the number of children in need of care: [llyw.cymru/sites/default/files/publications/2019-08/lleihau-nifer-y-plant-sydd-angen-gofal.pdf](https://llyw.cymru/sites/default/files/publications/2019-08/lleihau-nifer-y-plant-sydd-angen-gofal.pdf) and [gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-08/reducing-the-number-of-children-in-need-of-care.pdf](https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-08/reducing-the-number-of-children-in-need-of-care.pdf)

Led by an Independent Chair and supported by government officials, meetings were held with each local authority to discuss how they manage their service, their approach to risk and how they oversee entrance and exit from care. Officials worked with local authorities to develop a reporting template in which they could set out their own bespoke reduction expectation plans, tailored to their populations and demography. Following these discussions, 18 out of the 22 local authorities submitted reduction expectation plans, setting out the proposed reductions they aimed to achieve in line with the First Ministers commitments. Reduction Expectation Plans are in place for 3 years, covering the period 2019–2022.

Local authorities' set out a cumulative reduction over three years (2019–20 – 2021–22) as follows:

- A reduction of 9% children in the care system.
- A reduction of children placed out of county of 16%.
- A reduction of children placed out of Wales of 20%.
- Only a small number of authorities offered reductions in the numbers of children removed from parents with a learning disability. Local authorities have found this priority challenging as they have different approaches to collecting the information which has made it difficult to quantify numbers.

### Learning Disability Research

To help identify the number of children being taken into care from parents with a learning disability and the reasons behind their removal, IPC were commissioned to carry out research. This was published in December 2019. It found there was:

- Insufficient information about the number of children of parents with learning disability involved with Children's Social Care Services.

- One of the main reasons for this is the absence of a sufficiently clear national definition and guidance for Children's Social Care Services.
- Learning disability is rarely the only reason for parents being referred to Children's Social Care Services and for children to be taken into care.
- Although there are pockets of good practice, there is still much room for improvement.

Following the report, the University of South Wales was commissioned in February 2021 to develop national guidance to enable social workers to better identify and support parents who have a learning disability. This national guidance will set out the support and interventions that should be put in place to help reduce the need for children to be removed from parents who have a learning disability, and will set out a clear definition to help inform consistent data collection and policy development in this area. It is anticipated that the Guidance document will be delivered by October/November 2021.

### Impact of COVID-19

The coronavirus pandemic has presented enormous challenges to vulnerable families and placed considerable pressure on children's services, the family courts and our third sector partners. Safeguarding our most vulnerable children and young people has remained a key priority and local authorities and partners have managed the challenges admirably. Social workers, foster carers, the third sector and others have all gone the extra mile to care for and protect those they look after.

Despite the pressures, local authorities have been able to maintain stability across their services resulting in fewer new entrants to care, fewer placement moves and improved placement stability. Planned exits from care have also reduced during the pandemic as

children stay in care longer, which has impacted on the high looked after population figures. There have however been positive impacts of lockdown on family cohesion, improved contact arrangements and engagement with children and families and the impact of reduced social service intervention on family life.

To help mitigate the impact of COVID-19 and provide continued support to local authorities in delivering preventative approaches, we have invested almost £8.5m of COVID reserve monies. These include:

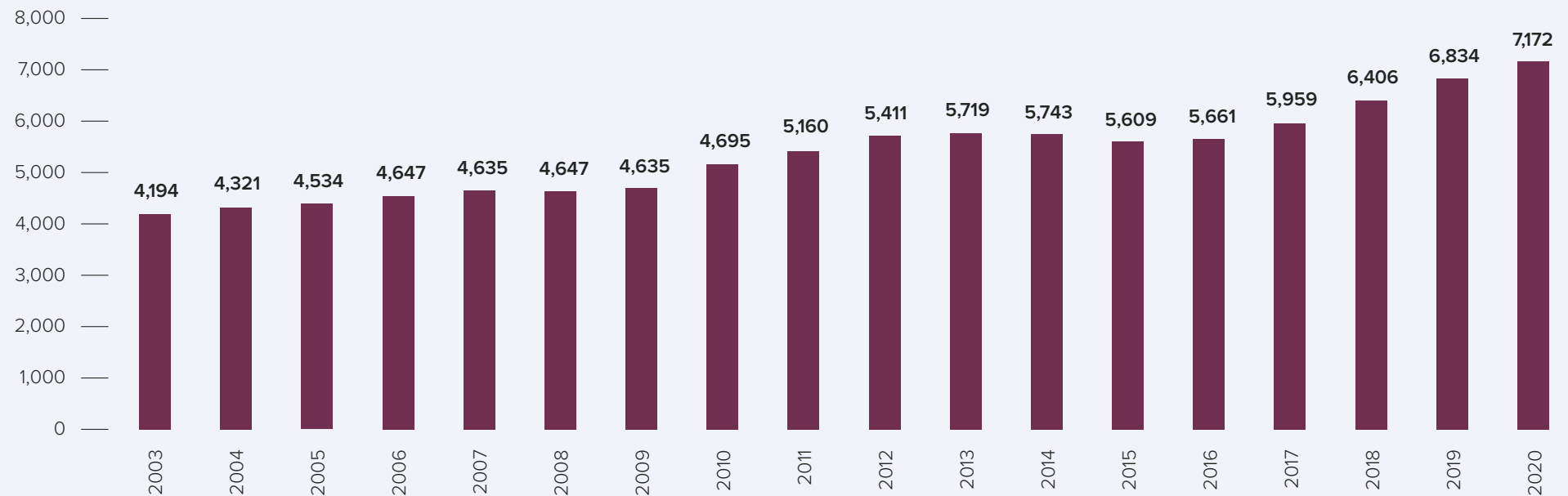
- £2.49m to relieve court case backlogs and support revocations from care.
- £2.2m for local authorities to develop family group conferencing.
- £1m COVID hardship fund for care leavers.
- £50k training for foster carers about children with complex needs.
- £320k to launch the national brand.
- £1.6m to help divert cases from the Child Protection Register.

## Legacy Item 1 Reducing numbers of children in care

Wales has some of the highest rates of children looked after across the UK and there is considerable variation between the rates of individual local authorities. Over the course of this Assembly Term, looked after children numbers have continued to rise, from 5,661 in 2016 to 7,172 in 2020 – a rise of 1,511 children or 26.7%. This increase in looked after children numbers is unsustainable and is

placing increasing pressure on local authorities and the family courts. However, despite these pressures local authorities and the family court system are delivering high quality and effective services which are safeguarding vulnerable children and supporting families, as demonstrated by the *Bright Spots* survey in 2018.

### Number of children looked after, at 23 March\*



Source: SSDA903 – Looked After Children Census

\* Excluding children looked after exclusively in short-term placements



These increases have taken place despite the continued focus of Welsh Ministers and the activity set out in the Improving Outcomes for Children programme, supported by the MAG. As demonstrated above, there has been significant activity to support and develop prevention and early intervention services and investment by Welsh Government e.g Edge of Care, Reflect, ICF.

### Reduction Expectation Plans

2021–22 will be the final year of our 3-year reduction expectation journey and continued monitoring will be required. The rising numbers of children being taken into care has been a stubborn and escalating problem for a number of years and the intervention of the First Minister to introduce **Reduction Expectation Plans** was a direct response to this issue. Reduction Expectation Plans are designed to re-balance the system and support families to care for their own children, including undertaking additional reunification activity so children can return home once family issues have been resolved.

In Year 1 (2019–20) looked after children numbers increased by 4%. However when compared against a backdrop of 7% rises in each of the previous 3 years, the rate of increase reduced. So far in Year 2 (up to quarter 3 in 2020–21), looked after numbers have increased by a further 2.2%, which represents a further slowing in the rate of increase, against the backdrop and challenge of COVID-19. When setting their plans, local authorities stated reductions would be slow to achieve in the first year and pick up pace in years two and three. Whilst the rate of increase is indeed slowing, local authority reduction expectation plans have not yet resulted in a reduction in the numbers of looked after children in Wales.

Official statistics show in 2019–20, there was a 7% decrease in the number of children entering care. This is the largest decrease in recent years and aligns with the introduction of the reduction expectations work. Previous decreases also were found 2017–18 (3%) and 2018–19 (2%). However, the number of children leaving care has also decreased (1% in 2019–20), affecting the overall number. The number of children leaving care has decreased each year since 2014–15 and it is this pattern of decreasing exits from care is helping to contribute to our growing LAC population figures. We know that COVID is exacerbating this pattern, with fewer exits from care to help ensure stability during the pandemic.

What has shown better results is in the number of children in care but not with own parents, wider relatives or friends. Since the introduction of reduction plans (March 2019), there has been a 1.4% decrease in children placed away from their families, which is in line with the First Minister's commitment.

On the other hand, Out of County and Out of Wales placements have continued to increase, by 5.2% and 7% respectively in 2019–20 and 5.6% and 5.4% as of quarter 3 in 2020-21. Whilst these figures are disappointing, the majority of these placements are with family/friends or specialist placements where there are complex needs. Local authorities indicate that a shortage of placements, lack of in-house residential provision and increasing complex needs are factors in the increase of out of county and out of Wales provision. This emphasises the need for completing activity underway to ensure sufficiency of placements in Wales; in particular the National Fostering Framework, residential care and accommodation for children with complex needs.

Data to support the measure around the numbers of children removed from parents with a learning disability is low. Only 8 of the 22 local authorities currently report against this measure due to continued concerns, including little or no numbers of children in the cohort and a lack of clarity about the definition of 'parent with a learning disability'. The University of South Wales was commissioned in February 2021 to set out a clear definition to help inform consistent data collection and policy development in this area and develop national guidance to enable social workers to better identify and support parents who have a learning disability. This will be delivered by November 2021.

Welsh Ministers continue to take the view that there are too many children in Wales removed from their families and placed into the care system. This agenda will remain a key policy commitment for the new Government. Further work is needed to urgently redress the imbalance between placing children in care and the provision of support to keep families together.

### Ongoing activity to support reductions

To support local authorities to deliver reductions, an Oversight Board has been established to lead on a number of strands of work including:

- Developing and implementing a Learning and Improvement programme, including facilitating the All Wales Heads of Children's Services Peer Learning Framework, a peer-learning network and a suite of masterclasses to share practice, learning across the whole system.
- Delivering a suite of masterclasses with WLGA and SCW to support workforce well-being, strengths based approaches and sessions on specific models of practice such as resilient families

and reunification. To date masterclasses have been on Family Group Conferencing (FGC), Parental Advocacy and preventing newborns entering care.

- Transformation and Support Team review sessions with local authorities and partners to identify:
  - learning and service improvements to share across Wales;
  - further support across the system needed to promote family restoration and support children to stay with their families.

### Family Justice

UK Government is currently leading a reform programme in both public and private law, as set out by the Public and Private Law Working Groups. The over-riding challenge is to reduce the number of cases coming to court by putting in place safe and alternative support services and practices diverting families away from court.

In Private Law, the North Wales Local Family Justice Board has been selected as one of two sites (the other site is Dorset in England) to establish and trial some private law reforms. These include the Harm Panel's recommendations, piloting an Integrated Domestic Abuse Court (IDAC) and the testing of an 'investigative' approach to the resolution of private law cases.

Public Law work has focussed on whether children and young people can be safely diverted away from becoming subjects of public law proceedings, and the timeliness of decisions once they are subject to proceedings. A training package is being developed to support the roll out of a number of Best Practice Guides (e.g. application and case management procedures; use of Supervision Orders and Section 76) associated with this work.

Working through the Family Justice Network for Wales and with Local Family Justice Boards, Welsh Government is working closely with partners to support the delivery of both pieces of work over the Spring. It is anticipated these will have a significant impact on the culture and working practices within the family justice system.

Further, a Family Drug and Alcohol Pilot will shortly commence in Wales, being delivered by the South East Wales Local Family Justice Board. Work is at a planning stage with activity to due to commence in the Autumn. This will instigate a problem-solving court approach to care proceedings that parents can choose to enter rather than going through standard care proceedings.

## Research and Future Reform

It is clear that there is pressure throughout the looked after children system. Research continues to raise questions about the effectiveness of support available for parents of children who receive care and support, in families where domestic abuse, substance misuse or poor mental health are prevalent. A significant proportion of spend by the state is on 'late intervention' for children and families, with one of the largest single items the cost of children who are taken into care.

Deprivation and austerity play a significant part in the increase in numbers of looked after children but they are not the whole story. The Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP) 2019 report Analysis of factors contributing to high rates of care, analysed the factors causing variation in looked after children rates across Wales. Their analysis showed deprivation accounted for 53% of variation, with policy & practice 19% and parental capacity (including domestic violence/substance misuse/mental health issues) 24%. As a follow up to the research, WCPP recently undertook a survey of children's

social services practitioners and leaders, which found the largest factor influencing care rates, according to social workers and leaders, is the courts. Other key factors that play a part include the different practice models adopted, different practices to deliver services and perceptions of risk by practitioners.

Local authority Children's Services in Wales operate a range of different practice frameworks or practice models. These range from packages, such as Signs of Safety, that are bought in and adopted, to those developed by a local authority themselves. Conversations undertaken with local authorities in 2019 about reduction expectations identified the critical role and importance of having an established, understood and consistently applied Practice Framework or Practice Model in place. To explore this area further, Social Care Wales has commissioned the Institute for Public Care (IPC) to complete a scoping exercise for a future model of support for vulnerable children and families.

Looking at social care reform more widely, a ***Social Care Futures*** White Paper has been published and is currently out for consultation. Outcomes from the consultation will guide future thinking and discussions about developing a share vision for children's services and the shape of future service delivery; including Not for Profit care, commissioning, strengthening Regional Partnership Boards, value based care etc.

A new senior leadership group has been established by the Permanent Secretary to help deliver a new ambition and vision for care experienced children and a common sense of ownership across all policy portfolios. It is intended this will drive better multi-disciplinary, cross-departmental working those who provide services to them, based on better universal and targeted support, less risk adverse decision making, strong professional practice and clear local leadership.

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## Workstream 2: Providing and Commissioning a flexible, affordable and sufficient range of High Quality Placements

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The Improving Outcomes for Children Programme has been actively engaged in a wide range of initiatives developed by Welsh Government, local government and the third sector to improve placement choice, quality and stability. Stable placements are crucial to providing children in care with a feeling of belonging and security. For children already in care, this means making every effort to re-unify families when appropriate, in the interests of the child and when it is safe to do so. The increasing pressure on children's services has meant it is becoming more difficult to match children with appropriate placements across the range of options such as fostering, adoption and residential care.

### Fostering

Ensuring care experienced children are able to access good quality and timely placements, close to home, has been a key focus of the Improving Outcomes for Children programme. Local authorities have a duty to take steps to ensure they have sufficient accommodation to meet the needs of the children they look after ('the sufficiency duty'). As the major provider and sole commissioner of fostering services in Wales, local government have played a key role in driving the agenda for change, placements being a key theme of the IO4C programme. All local authorities in Wales have an in-house fostering service and some provide in-house residential accommodation. Local authorities also commission foster and residential care from private providers and voluntary organisations. The Children's Commissioning Consortium

Cymru (4Cs) works with local authorities to develop local and regional placement commissioning strategies, although more work remains to be done especially around regional commissioning of specialist services.

Local authorities acknowledged the need to tackle problems that were undermining consistent delivery of their responsibility for providing care experienced children and young people with a sufficient range and number of good quality foster placements. Continuing with traditional ways of working was seen as likely to prolong a situation characterised by 'managed decline', especially given the operational and financial context for looked after children services as a whole

The National Fostering Framework (NFF) was developed by local authorities, central government and the third sector as a five-year change programme to tackle these issues. Funding has been made available on an annual basis, initially by the Welsh Government and subsequently by the WLGA. In 2020-2021, Welsh Government provided a grant to help put in place some of the assets needed for branding and marketing.

The infrastructure has been put in place to enhance consistency in the delivery of foster care services across Wales.

The Good Practice Guide for the assessment and support of Kinship Foster Carers has been developed and published and is being used by local authorities to support their practice for foster cares who are 'connected' to the child they are fostering.

## Legacy Item 2 National Fostering Framework

A significant proportion of local resources and time is spent each day searching for placements which do not exist or are inaccessible. Despite best efforts, current commissioning arrangements have not yet prevented growing numbers of children being placed outside of their local area, placing pressures on the education and health resources of neighbouring authorities and increasing costs for placing authorities.

Recruitment of foster carers is key to the success and development of local authority fostering. It was identified that a key requirement to achieve this goal would be the development of an “all Wales brand for Local Authority fostering”, a consistent national brand for Local Authority fostering that reflects the strengths and personalities of the 22 Local Authorities. This presents an opportunity to rebalance service provision, address demands, and improve quality of placement choice for children.

### **The national brand will:**

- Increase local placement accessibility, sufficiency, and choice and give control back to the local authorities to make best use of those placements when they need them, reducing the reliance on third parties and removing placement blockage.
- Enable services to meet the evolving needs of children and families. Recruitment campaigns will be targeted to meet service needs.
- Facilitate the recruitment of a new pool of foster carers. Recruitment and training can be focused to develop skills in reunification work, complex needs and parent and child fostering.

- Enable children who need a foster carer to have access to the right foster carer, at the right time and in the right location.

### **1. Recruitment & Marketing**

An all Wales Brand for fostering has been designed and endorsed by all 22 local authorities and comprehensive implementation plans have been produced for national, regional and local delivery.

A recruitment needs analysis will be undertaken for each local authority and will inform national and local recruitment strategy.

A Recruitment & Retention Best Practice Guide will be produced to support services to embed best practice standards in relation to recruitment practice and process.

The Best Practice Guide will establish and implement best practice across all Welsh local authorities and will address current variances in quality. It will also maintain recruitment practice standards which will serve to ensure brand integrity nationally and across each local authority.

Welsh Government has invested £319k during 20-21 to ‘kick-start’ the infrastructure of the campaign. It is anticipated that this will be launched in May/June 2021. Welsh Government is committed to investing in supporting the infrastructure associated with the national brand for a further two years.

## 2. Foster Care Finance

The aim is to achieve overall harmonisation of payments made to local authority foster carers across Wales as part of the wider package of support. Consensus has been achieved across all local authorities to work towards harmonisation. Development of a toolkit is underway which:

- i. Includes a National Policy Framework for payments to foster carers
- ii. Includes a Recommendation for national reward rates
- iii. Provides legal context and guidance
- iv. Provides a methodology for cost calculations and implementation guidance
- v. Provides tools to support use and embed new practices

## 3. Local Authority 'Core Offer' for Foster Carers

The core offer to local authority foster carers will be improved and will extend current offers to achieve regional harmonisation and where possible national harmonisation.

A national mapping has been completed to obtain a clear understanding of what differences and commonalities exist across all 22 local authorities. Development of a National Core Offer is underway. The core offer aims to make best use of the current resources within local authority provision.

Development of Enhanced Regional Core Offers are also underway. At regional level these aim to extend current local offers across each local authority within the region to achieve full regional harmonisation.

This will provide the following benefits:

- i. Equality of access to support and rewards for fostering families and children looked after.
- ii. Recruitment incentive to attract a wider pool of potential foster carers and improve placement options.
- iii. Improved wellbeing for fostering families and children looked after.
- iv. Improved stability for children looked after.
- v. Increased foster carer retention and service sustainability.
- vi. Continued availability of learning and development for foster care.



## SGO/Kinship

Arrangements for supporting kinship carers have been strengthened through co-production of a kinship care guide with funding from Children in Wales. The Ministerial Advisory Group supported this development and the consultation process regarding a national framework for special guardianship support services, including common eligibility criteria for financial and other support.

In March 2020 the Welsh Government launched a framework of support for Special Guardians which sets out an all Wales 'offer' of special guardianship support services. It sets out, the minimum that each local authority should make available in order to comply with the regulatory framework. This framework will build upon the existing work in the field of special guardianship and will ensure some uniformity of support across Wales.

## Children's Residential Care T&F Group

The work of the Children's Residential Care Task and Finish Group, a sub-group of the Improving Outcomes for Children Ministerial Advisory Group, has been focussed around the following priorities:

- profiling children's residential care in Wales
- reviewing models of residential care for children and young people and providing training across public and private sector workforce on different models of care and the commonalities of good practice to deliver positive outcomes
- Exploring the development of an equivalent scheme to When I am Ready in residential care, including young people's views on leaving residential care

- developing practice guidance on out of area and cross-border placements for children and young people in residential care
- developing real time data dashboards and reporting modules, via the Childrens Commissioning Support Resource (CCSR) platform, on residential capacity, service profile, vacancies, reasons for unavailable placements and sufficiency gaps
- commissioning and rolling out training in trauma informed care for residential care workers
- commissioning and publishing a protocol around the decriminalisation of looked after children including in residential care, which will be supported by a training toolkit targeted at effective implementation of the protocol and embedding improved prevention and diversion from the criminal justice system
- scoping and developing arrangements for PACE and Remand placements in residential care
- learning good practice lessons related to residential care services and support during the COVID-19 pandemic
- supporting Regional Partnership Boards in their work to develop accommodation for children with complex needs.

We have received several research and advice outputs from the work outlined which have helped to inform and build the picture of a sector where knowledge was previously lacking. The voice of children and young people has been evident throughout this work programme through the engagement of Voices from Care Cymru and the Young Commissioners Programme. Other pieces of work remain outstanding, delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and will continue in to the next Senedd term. Examples of work to take forward include the completion and issue of the practice guidance on residential care out of area and cross-border placements which will happen in line with DfE's review

of its Children Act 1989 statutory guidance; the rollout of pilot PACE and Remand residential placement arrangements and their evaluation; and completing and issuing the decriminalisation protocol.

## **Welfare secure/Hillside**

An element of the children's residential care work was to develop data in relation to welfare secure placements in Hillside. The Secure Welfare Coordination Unit which handles secure welfare placement arrangements for Welsh local authorities, produces a quarterly report about those placements and when it has not been possible to make such placements. The latter is feeding in to work going forward in the next Senedd term which is to review the data currently collected with a view to painting a more detailed picture about access to and use of welfare secure placements.

In line with the developing Youth Justice Blueprint and the recent Senedd Cabinet paper about the future of youth custody provision in Wales, we will be considering the future for welfare secure provision.



## Legacy Item 3 Accommodation for children with complex needs

The case for regional, integrated health and social care residential provision for children with complex, 'high end' emotional and behavioural needs, has been well made, not least by the Children's Commissioner for Wales in her No Wrong Door report. Regional Partnership Boards (RPBs) estimate there are a small but significant number of children across Wales that require residential and specialist care and support to meet high end need. 'High end' need is defined as severe emotional and behavioural needs that may or may not have a diagnosis that requires intensive therapeutic interventions.

### **This type of residential provision:**

- would minimise the use of expensive placements out of area and bring back or keep children closer to home, a key area of the MAG work programme
- would help avoid escalation of need that could result in a secure welfare placement or tier 4 inpatient mental health placement and
- could be used as 'step down' provision to enable discharge from a secure or tier 4 setting.

### **In this last year, significant progress has been made:**

- the RPBs were identified as the most appropriate vehicle through which provisions would be developed
- the RPBs undertook work to identify need and think about how the need is best met

- to develop and test out new models of delivery, a pump priming budget of £2m revenue funding for 2021–22 was identified from the Integrated Care Fund and
- an Expression of Interest process for the £2m was developed and issued to the RPBs resulting in all seven regions putting forward proposals.

The Expressions of Interest process was clear that RPBs would need to include plans for sustaining the provision after one year including a commitment to retain the service in line with the original proposal. Looking forward, decisions on the allocations of the £2m will be made and notified to the RPBs and the provisions will be evaluated which will inform learning for services and support going forward.

## Adoption

The National Adoption Service for Wales is an innovative collaborative, bringing together all local authority adoption services into a three-tier structure. Regionally, local authorities work together within five regional collaboratives to provide a range of adoption services. Each regional collaborative has links with the voluntary adoption agencies, health and education. They all provide the adoption agency functions for children, recruiting and assessing adopters, offering counselling to birth parents and advice to adopted adults. Nationally, the Director of Operations and a small central team, hosted by the City of Cardiff Council on behalf of all local authorities, drive improvement, consistency and co-ordination.

Members of the Ministerial Advisory Group have played a significant role in developing the capacity of the National Adoption Service to meet the need for placements and to put in place a national model of adoption support. Welsh Government has provided local authorities with £2.3 million funding in 2019–20 and 2020–21 to help strengthen adoption provision to prevent children re-entering care and to reduce the time they spend waiting to exit care through adoption.

Following investment from Welsh Government, NAS introduced a three tiered **Framework for Adoption Support** services in 2016, which sets out the “offer” in Wales for those affected by adoption. The type of support offered consists of the following over three levels:

- Universal Support
- Targeted services
- Specialist Support

### In terms of core business the following improvements have been achieved:

- The approval of adopters happens in a timely way on average 6.4 months between formal application to approval and 10 months between enquiry and approval. Both significantly lower than before NAS was established as reported at the time of the original NAFW enquiry
- Children are placed in a timely way on average 9 months after the placement order is granted
- The proportion of children leaving the looked after children system through adoption was 18% in 2019–20.

NAS has developed productive relationships with a wide range of partners including Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs) in Wales. VAAs describe a clear sense of partnership nationally, and increasingly regionally, which is informing their business planning and an understanding of their positioning with the local government elements of the sector. Further maturing of the relationships between the VAA's and NAS at regional and local authority level is being achieved through key developments of jointly funded services such as TESSA, Connected and Adopting Together

### TESSA (Therapeutic, Education and Support Services in Adoption)

Following an additional £2.3m investment by the National Lottery Community Fund and Welsh Government, **TESSA** is aimed at supporting adoptive families who have children aged between 2 and 12 years. The scheme provides adoptive parents with the understanding, skills and support to enable their child to begin to recover from early childhood trauma, increasing their chance of resuming a healthy developmental path. It is designed to be used as

a preventative early intervention support for families who are at risk of the effects of early childhood trauma. Each regional adoption service has a TESSA coordinator and as such all referrals to TESSA programme come through the regional adoption teams.

### Adopting Together

The Adopting Together Service is a collaborative adoption service led by St David's Children Society and supported by Welsh Government and the National Adoption Service in Wales. The service brings together all the Voluntary Adoption Agencies in Wales to find adoptive families for the most vulnerable children who have been waiting the longest within Wales. These children are typically those who:

- are brothers and sisters who need to stay together
- are over 4 years old
- have additional needs or uncertainty around their development
- are from a black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) background.

### Connect

The **Connect** service is collaboratively funded and delivered across Wales using Welsh Government investment; it is currently working towards achieving the Children and Young People 'Participation Kite mark'. It is providing a group based support service ('Connected') as well as developing tailored advice and information for adopted children and young people that will be web-based. Alongside this there are engagement and participation opportunities for adopted children and young people as well as a new Young Ambassador (YA) Scheme for 18–25 year olds.

### Welsh Adoption Register

Through funding from the Welsh Government, the National Adoption Services has brought the Welsh Adoption Register in house and has modernised and updated its facilities. The Register now provides a tailor-made database for adoption agencies (including voluntary adoption agencies) in Wales to use. It allows for access to data to better evidence and drive improvement in adoption activity across Wales, particularly in respect of those children who are more difficult to place with prospective parents. The system also enhances adoption support arrangements by providing a 'keeping in touch' system for adopters and NAS.

### Wales Cohort Study

The Welsh Government has invested in the Wales Adoption Cohort Study which has been carried out by researchers at Cardiff University.

The study follows a number of families over 5 years, which looks at the lives of adopters and their experiences in accessing adoption support services. The study provides vital evidence in the promotion of a successful adoption in Wales and aims to investigate what factors, or characteristics underpin early placement success for families who have adopted children in Wales. In particular the research has yielded invaluable information which has enabled NAS and Welsh Government to develop responses that will help to preserve adoptions ever more effectively; and to recruit greater numbers of suitable adopters due to gaining a full understanding of the pressures on, and successes of, adoptive families and the best ways to support them in their role. This research has therefore enabled funding to be directed to provide support and provision where it is most needed.

## Good Practice Guidance

NAS has supported initiatives and learning opportunities that seek to enhance knowledge and adoption practice in Wales. The following have good practice guides have been published to support the sector:

- Recruitment of adopters 2015 and 2019
- Family Finding 2016 (due to be reviewed and updated)
- Life Journey Work 2017
- Contact (2020)
- Working with Birth Parents (2020)
- Transition and early Support (2020)
- Adoption Support (2020).

## Embedding the new life journey work framework

All children who cannot be cared for by their birth families, need to have an understanding of their family history and their unique journey through life journey materials which support a child's identity, promote self-esteem, and help give the child a sense of belonging and wellbeing. Through Welsh Government investment, NAS is continuing to work on improving the content, quality and availability of Life Journey Materials for adopted children, young people and their families. The Framework and Good Practice Guide for Life Journey work in Wales was launched in 2016 and continues to be implemented. The investment from Welsh Government funding has enabled a champion 'co-ordinator' post to be created in each of the five NAS regions, in order to better implement the approach consistently.

## Barometer Report

Adoption UK produced its first Adoption Barometer report in 2019. The report, drawn together through surveys undertaken on adopters and their families, has provided a comprehensive study of 'lived experience' of adoption within the UK and Wales which the data collected can be used to inform the future policy direction for adoption support services. The report showed that overall Wales came out strongly against other UK nations, reflecting the stage of development of policy provision for adoption. In particular since its launch, Wales has scored the highest overall for adopter experience especially with regards to the investments made in Wales. This has been especially proven in areas such as the development of a tool kit for recording children's life story work and the effect of the pupil premium plus work in Welsh schools.

## Legacy Item 4 Adoption

Welsh Government is continuing to work with the National Adoption Service to develop its collaborative model and its vision for the future and to ensure it is still fit for purpose.

The investment provided has enabled NAS to develop new services and increase the level of support available to adoptive families across Wales. Significant numbers of adopted children, young people and their families are now receiving support which did not previously exist. These services have been co-produced with children, young people and their families, creating new shared collaborative services across local government and the third sector. The National Adoption Service will continue to develop and improve support services.

The newly streamlined governance and new Partnership Agreement are designed to further enhance accountability and enable NAS to operate the commissioning model. Accompanying this will be a drive to seek support of local authorities to consider sharing resources and services in different ways alongside developing best practice and achieving optimal delivery models.

NAS' continuing core function moving forward will be to continue to ensure sufficient adoptive families are available to place all children on an adoption pathway in a timely way as well as providing high quality services across its other functions

Implementation of the recently issued Good Practice Guides will continue alongside further work in the next two years on the Family Finding function. NAS is already modernising adoption in Wales; this work will place NAS in a good position to inform/implement any changes arising from the Public Law Working Group to consider reform of adoption law and practice.

Another priority will be to further develop the performance framework to include more outcome measures. There are other elements of service to improve e.g. adults seeking information/contact with birth families.

## Workstream 3: Supporting Best Possible Journeys through Care and Into Adulthood

The Improving Outcomes for Children programme has aimed to ensure that those who are or have been looked after by local authorities receive effective help to overcome adverse experiences and achieve the same life chances as other children. All agencies involved with children, young people and their families have a role to play, delivering a range of services and support at all stages in the life of a child in need.

Local authorities have corporate parenting responsibilities for looked after children and young people and more general duties in promoting the welfare of children in need. Under the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014, the whole council has a responsibility towards making sure that people in need of care and support receive the right help at the right time to improve their well-being and protect them from harm. These contribute to the delivery of an integrated model of services to children and young people in which other public sector bodies such as health and the police, and third sector organisations play a crucial role. Through this cross-sector approach we have sought to create environments and opportunities which allow children to develop, flourish and realise their potential.

## Educational Attainment

Every child in Wales – including those who are looked after – has the right to expect an excellent education regardless of their circumstances. It is well recognised that good educational attainment can provide the gateway to future stability, security and an independent, fulfilling life. In January 2016, a three year joint education and social services plan *Raising the ambitions and educational attainment of children who are looked after in Wales*, was published to help strengthen arrangements in place to support the education of children who are looked after. A multi-agency approach was taken to deliver the actions in the plan and helped develop a better understanding of the barriers faced by looked after children as learners in education and how social and education services can work together to deliver better outcomes.

When the strategy ended in 2019, a working group comprising MAG members and stakeholders from education, social services and the third sector was established to support the identification of future education priorities for looked after children. Reflecting on achievements of the three year plan, it was agreed to take forward work to explore an integrated and holistic approach to supporting looked after children. Sir Alasdair Macdonald was commissioned to undertake a scoping exercise between January and March 2020, exploring an integrated approach to improving educational outcomes for looked after children.

His report<sup>7</sup> outlined the good practice that is happening in Wales and also focussed on parts of the system that aren't working as well, such as the variation between local authorities in how they support looked after children in education. His report set out five recommendations:

1. The development of a Welsh Virtual School model
2. The level of resourcing required to enable an integrated approach that improves outcomes
3. The importance of high quality data
4. The implications for training
5. The need to broaden measures of what constitutes educational outcomes for LAC

Further work is underway to learn from pioneering work in Carmarthenshire and the Virtual School model, in England and Scotland, as a basis for a Welsh approach and will require continued action in the next Assembly Term. This is a cross cutting project which impacts on education, social services, health and employment and is an opportunity to take work forward for multiple benefits.

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<sup>7</sup> [gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2020-07/integrated-approach-improving-educational-outcomes-looked-after-children.pdf](https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2020-07/integrated-approach-improving-educational-outcomes-looked-after-children.pdf)

## Legacy Item 5 Educational Attainment

Moving forward, we want to ensure the education of looked after children continues to be high priority for education and social services departments alike. Schools provide a stable environment for many children in need or children in care. It can be an important part of the day where there is a sense of normality away from what can otherwise be chaotic lives.

Our national mission commits to delivering a new, transformational curriculum supported by strong and inclusive schools committed to excellence, equity and well-being. Welsh Government has pledged to strengthen partnership working to deliver better outcomes for looked after children and the activity already in train will require pursuing it should remain a key priority in the next Assembly Term.

We recognise the impact the pandemic has had, and continues to have, on learners, particularly the most vulnerable learners and looked after children. It has affected learners in different ways – their progression and their physical and mental health and well-being in particular. This range of experiences means we need to enable schools and teachers to support their learners to develop along their own learning pathway, as they return fully to face-to-face learning.

### Virtual School Approach

The Virtual School approach is to work with looked after children (and, in some cases, young people in post-16 provision), as if they were in a single school and to raise educational attainment, improve attendance and improve educational stability. Virtual Schools are statutory in England.

The school does not exist in real terms, or as a building. Children do not attend it – they remain the responsibility of the school at which they are enrolled. A Virtual School is an organisational tool which has been created for the effective co-ordination of support for this vulnerable group at a strategic and operational level.

The Children and Families Act 2014 requires local authorities in England to appoint a Virtual School Head (VSH), for the purpose of discharging the local authority's duty to promote the educational achievement of its LAC. That person must be an officer employed by the local authority or, where local authorities agree to collaborate or share the role, another local authority in England.

As with mainstream schools which have Governing Bodies, many Virtual Schools have a Management Committee. This provides another layer of scrutiny, accountability and support for the Virtual School Head and the Virtual School.

### The role of a Virtual School is to:

- Influence policy and develop and improve services for looked after children
- Promote individual achievement, health, and wellbeing.
- Provide advice, support and training to professionals, schools and carers
- Improve access to specialist services, including health assessments, mental health assessments and treatment.



- Provide access to professional advice and guidance on education, training and employment.
- Promote additional opportunities for out of school learning and leisure.

Evaluation of the pilot in England found that LAC attainment figures were generally better in the pilot areas than overall nationally.

### **Carmarthenshire Model**

Carmarthenshire County Council has developed an integrated education and children's service. The authority has committed to systemic change over a number of years under strategic leadership from their integrated education and children services department, which includes similar principles to the Virtual School models across the UK. As a result they are now reporting significant improvements in the attainment of children who are looked after whilst at school and beyond. The changes benefited vulnerable children more widely by introducing multi-professional teams and system wide training on Trauma Informed Practice. The local authority also take their corporate parenting very seriously by offering future opportunities such as traineeships and apprentices to children they look after.

As part of this approach there is a significant focus on training: training for school staff; and training for foster carers, adopters, social workers, youth service and schools in attachment aware relational models and tools. Since their change in approach the council have been monitoring impact. In 2018 71.4% of children looked after achieved the core subject indicator at key stage 2. This was 11.2% more than the all Wales average.

IFF Research are currently undertaking research with a wide range of stakeholders between January and March 2021. IFF Research is engaging with partners across Education and Social Services, including Directors of Education, Directors of Social Services, Heads of Children's Services, local authority Looked after children in Education coordinators, and care experienced young people. The research will inform a final report with recommendations for Welsh Government. The report will enable Welsh Government to develop policy for supporting looked after children in education moving forwards.

## **Pupil Development Grant for looked after children (PDG-LAC)**

Throughout the course of this Assembly, Welsh Government has supported looked after children in education by some £5 million annually through PDG-LAC. The Regional Education Consortia administer this grant in collaboration with local authorities and schools. As well as direct funding to support care experienced children, the funding includes provision for four Regional Lead Coordinators for Looked after Children; one for each of the Regional Education Consortia. The Coordinators work closely together and with Welsh Government to ensure the impact and value for money of PDG-LAC is maximised.

PDG-LAC funding is based on £1,150 per looked after child; however the funding is not ring-fenced for each child. This approach enables Consortia, working with partners, to determine the most effective, strategic interventions to support care experienced young people regardless of care or school placement changes. In April 2019, Welsh Government put in place new, strengthened arrangements for PDG-LAC, developed to enable greater national consistency to deliver the best educational outcomes for these children.

In addition, we introduced the newest strand to the PDG Access – in 2018–19, to provide additional support directly to families who need it most to help meet some of the costs associated with the school day, including school uniform. Since its introduction we have more than doubled the funding to over £5m, allowing us to support more learners. This element is calculated in a different way to the overall PDG as it is a type of benefit. PDG Access funding is available

for looked after children in every compulsory school year in situations where local authorities are the corporate parent and eligibility does not take into account the income of the foster family.

## **Foster Wellbeing**

The Fostering Network was awarded funding to deliver Fostering Well-being, a pilot programme designed test and evaluate social pedagogy principles in a foster care environment. The pilot programme has proven successful and is being expanded to other regions across Wales.

## **Corporate Parenting**

Local authorities in Wales have a legal and moral duty to provide support to the children it looks after. As Corporate Parents, it is a local authority's responsibility to keep the children they look after safe, to make sure that their experiences in care are positive, and to improve their access to opportunities for them to succeed in life. Elected Members have a responsibility to ensure that children looked after by a local authority are able to thrive, are nurtured, supported, educated and prepared for adult life in the way any parent would want for their own children.

Whilst corporate parenting is taken seriously by local authorities, it is often seen as a function for children's social services and elected members, rather than a whole authority issue. A Cabinet Paper on Corporate Parenting<sup>8</sup> was presented in November 2019, setting out our aim to strengthen corporate parenting across all departments within the local authority and to enable better partnership working and improved transitions between services provided for care experienced children, in education or housing for example.

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<sup>8</sup> [gov.wales/extending-corporate-parenting-across-public-services-looked-after-children.html](https://gov.wales/extending-corporate-parenting-across-public-services-looked-after-children.html)

However, care experienced children also engage with and require the support of a wide range of a range of public services outside of local authorities, both devolved and non-devolved – e.g. the NHS, the Police and the justice system. It is also our intention to widen the concept of corporate parenting across all public services that provide services to care experienced children, to help ensure care experienced children are provided with the best response and support from these services.

A Task and Finish Group, chaired by David Melding and including members of the Ministerial Advisory Group was established in 2019 to implement the proposals set out in the Cabinet Paper. The group met twice and held a stakeholder event, involving care experienced children, in January 2020.

## Legacy Item 6 Corporate Parenting

A clear way forward and plan for corporate parenting has been agreed and set out by the Ministerial Advisory Group and Task and Finish Group. However, existing plans for extending corporate parenting across all public services have been heavily impacted by the COVID-19. Engagement events to enable a national conversation with public services and stakeholders have not been able to take place. Broad agreement was reached that the time has not been right to engage with the wider public sector whilst in the midst of the pandemic. We are however looking to restart this work with renewed energy in the new Assembly Term.

### Activity is proposed in 3 areas:

#### Voluntary Charter

We are looking to co-produce a voluntary Charter that organisations can sign up to setting out their commitment and unique offer to care experienced children. This Charter will enable all stakeholders to sign up to a common statement of improved support and action when working with care experienced children. The Charter will allow signatories to set out how they engage with care experienced children and what they propose to do differently or offer in addition to care experienced children in the future. The charter will set out core principles, to be underpinned by revised codes of practice where needed. It should define expectations of commitment and engagement by each partner organisation.

#### National Conversation

To inform the development of the voluntary charter a 12 week stakeholder engagement exercise is planned to raise the profile of corporate parenting across public services and senior leaders. To raise the profile of corporate parenting across different sectors, it is planned for targeted engagement events with local authorities, the NHS, housing partners and others.

#### Statutory Guidance

We will use our existing legislative powers to strengthen statutory guidance, clarifying roles and responsibilities and extending duties across the public sector. This includes:

- Developing a new corporate parenting chapter in Part 6 of the SSWB Act.
- Amending the Part 9 Code of the SSWB to strengthen partnership arrangements with LHBs and LAs
- Using additional statutory guidance to embed corporate parenting across other public services.

## Mental Health

We know care experienced children and young people have higher rates of mental health problems than the general population. Ensuring children and young people with emotional health and wellbeing problems (both existing and as a result of the current COVID-19 pandemic) receive access to support and treatment in a timely and appropriate manner is a key priority. We continue to take a broad approach to improve the mental health of young people from prevention and early intervention through to improving access to specialist services. Progress has been made in improving mental health support for children and young people in the context of an increasing demand for services but there is still room for improvements to be made. The only sustainable way of responding to rising demand and the multifaceted nature of mental health support is to ensure that there is good, universal support available as well as good access to specialised services. A new *Together for Mental Health Delivery Plan 2019-2022*<sup>9</sup> was published in January 2021 which outlines the key priority areas and actions to be taken over this period.

The Together for Children and Young People (T4CYP) programme has been extended until March 2022, its work covers 3 key areas; the Early Help and Enhanced Support, working with Regional Partnership Boards and Neurodevelopment services support. The final Early Help and Enhanced support NEST/NYTH Framework will issue in April 2021 and is designed to build resilience and support mechanisms as part of a whole system approach for children, young people and their families. Provision is targeted at young people who require support based on need and would not necessarily meet thresholds for direct CAMHS intervention. Regional Partnerships Boards are working with the programme to adopt and implement the Framework as a key priority.

On behalf of the Ministerial Advisory Group, NSPCC and Voices From Care Cymru consulted with care experienced young people about support for their emotional and mental health. Care experienced young people were involved at every stage – focus groups to find out views; feeding back and consulting on recommendations; and at the launch event itself. The recommendations from their report, *Listen. Act. Thrive*, were integrated into the Improving Outcomes for Children programme and has helped shape the work of the T4CYP Early Help and Enhanced Support work stream.

The Welsh Government has made significant investment to improve mental health services for children and young people. This includes £15m new investment for Regional Partnership Boards to develop therapeutic support services. In addition, it is investing £2.5 million to develop adoption support services which help adopted children who need a form of emotional support but may not need the specialist service provided by CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services).

## Support for Care Leavers

As corporate parents, local authorities are required to help young people in their care move towards independence in a similar way to parents who have children living at home with them. Providing appropriate support and guidance to a young person early in their journey towards independence helps to maximise life chances.

In 2017, the Children's Commissioner published her *Hidden Ambitions* report, looking at the support available to young people leaving care. Her report was a call for action for Government, local authorities and the third sector to ensure young people leaving care can have the same expectations in terms of care and support as their peers.

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<sup>9</sup> [gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2020-01/together-for-mental-health-delivery-plan-2019-to-2022.pdf](https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2020-01/together-for-mental-health-delivery-plan-2019-to-2022.pdf)

In response, we integrated the recommendations from the report into the Ministerial Advisory Group's work plan and targeted additional funding to help deliver against these actions. This included:

- The establishment of the £1m St David's Day Fund to support care leavers access opportunities in education, training or employment.
- Providing £625k for local authorities to develop apprenticeship and traineeship opportunities within the local authority acting as good corporate parents.
- Providing £1m to local authorities so that Personal Adviser support can be provided for all care leavers up to the age of 25.
- Legislating for care leavers going into higher education to receive the maximum level of maintenance grant from 2018-19.
- Legislating in April 2019, requiring local authorities to exempt care leavers from paying council tax, a big step forward in our work to support young people transitioning towards independence.

The Children's Commissioner highlighted the strong response from both Welsh Government and local authorities in meeting her recommendations in her follow-on report.

The £1m **St David's Day Fund** has provided direct financial support to care leavers so they can access opportunities that will help them make a successful transition towards independent living and successful adult lives. In 2017–18, nearly 2,000 young people benefited from the fund and it continues to help care experienced young people each year to access opportunities in education/training and ensure smooth transitions to independence. In the 2019–20 financial year, the fund was doubled to support young people in relation to housing and during COVID, the fund can be utilised to support young people who have been adversely impacted by the pandemic. An additional £1m COVID Hardship Fund has been developed, akin to the St David's Fund, to support any additional needs.

The £1m additional funding to extend **Personal Adviser** support for care leavers aged 21–25 has meant an increase in the number of Personal Advisers recruited across Wales and more care leavers than ever taking up the extended offer support (500 care leavers taking up the extended offer of support up to age 25 in the first year alone). To affirm our commitment in this area and support improved consistency, we will be legislating in the next Assembly Term to ensure all care leavers have an entitlement to a Personal Adviser up to the age of 25, as a statutory duty.

Opportunities for **training and apprenticeships** have also been extended via the £625k funding to local authorities so that young people can participate in a local authority work placement or traineeship. Case studies highlight the range of opportunities that have been offered, for example, working in local authority schools, care settings, youth services and regeneration activities. This is an example of good corporate parenting.

Through the Improving Outcomes for Children programme, we have explored ways in which we can support young people to become independent. There are several projects where funding has been provided for this purpose. For example, Welsh Government has supported Action for Children's *Skills for Living/ Skills +* programmes. A joint Social Services and Housing Group has been set up to develop accommodation options for young people leaving care, and to prevent youth homelessness.

The £4m **youth homelessness innovation fund** is aimed at supporting projects to deliver new and innovative housing approaches for young people. These projects are specific to vulnerable young people aged 16–25 at risk of becoming homeless or currently homeless, with a number focused specifically on supporting care leavers. There are currently 25 projects operating across Wales.

As part of the Youth Support Grant funding, local authorities have appointed a Youth Homelessness Coordinator based in the youth service, working with their housing and social services colleagues to ensure those at risk of homelessness are identified at the earliest opportunity and supported.

We continue to fund Shelter Cymru to provide a bespoke service for young people providing advice and support to help them maintain tenancies and avoid homelessness. This includes an advice line, web chat facility and information on their website. The Shelter Cymru advice line and the Llamau youth homelessness helpline have now been linked up so that young people only have to ring one number day or night for support.

## Legacy Item 7 Care Leavers

It is important that care leavers are well supported to transition from care into independent living. This is a real investment in individuals' futures, provides a sense of personal worth, optimism and ambition. It will also enable young people to positively contribute to their communities.

A range of accommodation options for young people including care leavers is currently available, however there is recognition of the need to ensure there is the sufficient supply of appropriate, good quality accommodation to meet demand.

Additionally, the Welsh Government has been asked by the Children's Commissioner to deliver better access to safe and secure housing options. Through our Joint Social Services and Housing group, we are currently exploring with stakeholders what housing provision and support already exists and what more can be done. This includes:

- Commission a review and refresh of Barnardo's 'Care leavers accommodation and support framework for Wales' and accompanying training materials.
- We want to ensure improved housing support is provided to care leavers to help manage risks and maintain independence. Housing providers must be aware of additional flexibility required to support care leavers when things go wrong, provide alternative options and help avoid unnecessary evictions. We want to ensure this understanding is universal.

- Arrangements to proactively seek to establish whether a young person is care experienced, upon presentation as at risk of homelessness.
- Ensure a multi-agency review is undertaken any time a care experienced young person presents to a local authority as homeless or at-risk-of-homelessness.
- Ensure sufficient capacity and caseload of Personal Advisers in Wales, and ensure all care leavers have an entitlement to a Personal Adviser up to the age of 25, as a statutory duty.
- Young people's financial capabilities are developed to prepare for financial independence so they can manage rent and bills.
- That all young people who are living independently or at risk of homelessness are fully supported.



## 6. Whole System Achievements

### Hearing the Voice of the Child

Welsh Government is fully committed to paying due regard to children's rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and to ensuring that all children, whatever their circumstances, have an equal chance to fulfil their potential. It is this overarching children's rights approach that has been embedded into the work of the Improving Outcomes for Children programme and those of the Children and Young People's National Participation Standards.

We have aimed to consult and involve children and young people in our work as much as possible. The Vice Chair of the Ministerial Advisory Group is a care experienced young adult and his influence has been considerable. The wider voice of care experienced children has been effectively facilitated and represented by third sector organisations on the MAG, including Voices from Care, Children in Wales, NYAS and Tros Gynnal.

### Bright Spots

To discover what matters to care experienced children and help influence improvements in the way local services are delivered, a pilot survey was tested by the IO4C programme in 2018. The project, commissioned by the Welsh Government and supported by the Children's Commissioner for Wales, allowed six Welsh local authorities to use the Bright Spots 'Your Life Your Care' survey. The local authorities set out to:

- improve the care experience for all looked after children;
- give children a voice on their own well-being; and

- highlight the 'Bright Spots' of practice that contribute to children flourishing in care.
- The use of the survey by 686 children and young people in Welsh local authorities produced many important insights:
- Most children in care in Wales are settled in their placements and happy with their lives overall. However, 36% of children (4–7yrs) did not understand why they were looked after.
- About a quarter of children and young people wanted more frequent contact with a parent – while nearly one in five (19%) young people (11–18yrs) and 15% children (8–10yrs) had no contact with either parent.
- A third of young people (11–18yrs) felt they had too little contact with their siblings.
- A quarter of young people (11–18yrs) had three or more social workers in the year.

We recognise that we need better data to understand the experiences and outcomes of care experienced children and this has been a key priority in shaping our the new Performance and Improvement Framework for local authorities. The Framework will include a suite of new metric data which will focus on the volume and movement of children through the social care system and the introduction of a new approach to the Citizen Survey will be commissioned ready for launch in April 2021. The new survey will gather a range of views from children on their experiences of care and support and will ensure that children's views are actively sought and used by local authorities to inform improvement and change as part of the new approach to data and evidence.

## Children's Performance Framework

In 2018, a Task and Finish Group was established to develop a set of indicators to assist the Improving Outcomes for Children Ministerial Advisory Group measure progress and outcomes against its work programme. The group identified a range of indicators drawn from existing data sources (census data, performance frameworks and annual returns) covering children's social services, placements, educational attainment, health etc... that could help provide a picture of changes in outcomes for care experienced children.

The identification of these indicators and themes helped inform the first phase of the new Performance and Improvement Framework for social services in Wales, which became law in April 2020 with a Code of Practice relating to the performance and improvement of social services in Wales. The programme is now in its second phase, which will provide a better understanding of how to prevent children from becoming looked after, and managing those who enter care, developing additional methods of capturing and analysing data. Phase 2 will run for the course of the 2021–22 with new products developed for introduction during the year or at the start of 2022–23.

## National Approach to Statutory Advocacy for Children and Young People

The Ministerial Advisory Group has supported implementation of the National Approach to Statutory Advocacy for Children and Young People (NASA) which is a standardised approach to statutory advocacy services being delivered by the six Regional Social Services Collaboratives, and adoption of the new National Participation Charter/kitemark.

With additional funding made available by Welsh Government, local authorities now commission independent advocacy services in each region in line with the National Approach and promote the 'active offer'. This ensures that children and young people are entitled to an active offer of advocacy from a Statutory Independent Professional Advocate (IPA) when they become looked after or become subject of child protection enquiries leading to an Initial Child Protection Conference.

The Advocacy Task and Finish Group ended in January 2021. A new approach is commencing in April 2021 and will introduce Regional Fora, which will be better placed to ensure that the provision is appropriate for the needs of the area. This will be overseen by a National Fora, which will meet twice yearly.

## National Practice Standards for Independent Reviewing Officers

In 2018, AfA Cymru published National Practice Standards and a Good Practice Guide setting out the ways in which an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) should monitor and review and support the child or young person's care and support plan. The Practice Standards set out the responsibilities a local authority has in ensuring IROs are able to carry out their work. The Standards and Good Practice Guide clearly define the role, function, status and remit of the Independent Reviewing Officers who help to manage the planning and review process for all children who are in care, so they can perform their role to the highest standard.

## National Practice Standards for Independent Visitors

In 2020, NYAS Cymru published National Practice Standards and Guidance for the provision of Independent Visitors in Wales. These standards clarify the role and functions of Independent Visitors (IV's) in Wales and how they can contribute to the positive outcomes for children and young people. They set out in detail the role of Independent Visitors and the responsibilities of local authorities and service providers to help ensure Independent Visitors are able to work most effectively and promote their important role. The Standards aim to improve the quality of independent visitors practice; establishing a consistent and rights based approach whereby all eligible children and young people are offered the possibility of being visited and developing a long term relationship with a suitable independent volunteer. Further work is now needed to implement the standards in practice so that young people are provided with the offer of an Independent Visitor.

## Unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC)

We have worked closely with the Wales Strategic Migration Partnership (WSMP), WLGA, local authorities and the Home Office in relation to support for unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC). We have invested nearly £600,000 which has directly supported the placements of UASC either via the Dubs Scheme (S.67 of the Immigration Act 2016), via the Channel crossings or by other means of spontaneous arrival. It has also funded work to build the capacity of social workers to support these children and young people. This includes:

- guides for social workers, foster carers and for the children and young people themselves, the latter in ten languages:  
[gov.wales/unaccompanied-asylum-seeking-children-guidance-professionals](https://gov.wales/unaccompanied-asylum-seeking-children-guidance-professionals)

- a briefing about the rights and entitlements of UASC in respect of the social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014: [gov.wales/law-care-and-support-unaccompanied-asylum-seeking-children](https://gov.wales/law-care-and-support-unaccompanied-asylum-seeking-children)
- a guide for current and potential foster carers of UASC: [www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/](https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/)
- training in asylum and immigration law as it relates to UASC and the rights and entitlements of UASC, funded by Welsh Government and provided by the WSMP.
- training in age assessment, funded and provided by both Welsh Government and the WSMP.
- a learning and activities week for UASC, funded by Welsh Government and organised by the WSMP and partners.
- a series of focus groups to understand the views of UASC about their experience of public services, funded by Welsh Government and organised by the WSMP and partners.

In addition to our formal Welsh Government statistics, we have worked to establish UASC data collection arrangements via the First Minister's Looked after Children Reduction Expectation programme. This data is helpful in understanding the flow and location of these children and young people in to Wales but there are some gaps, especially in relation to care leavers data and out of area placements.

Looking forward, we will be continuing our work with the WSMP, WLGA, local authorities and the Home Office to support the development of a National Transfer Scheme for UASC that works for Wales. We will also be publishing an updated version of the Age Assessment Toolkit and will be reviewing our collection of UASC data.

## Public Accounts Committee

During the course of this Senedd Term, the Public Accounts Committee undertook an inquiry into the expenditure and value for money of public services for care experienced children and young people. This was undertaken during spring and summer 2018 and the Committee published its report in November 2018. The Welsh Government response was considered by Committee in January 2019 and the Committee held a further evidence session with the Welsh Government in January 2020 to discuss progress with implementing the Committee's recommendations. The Ministerial Advisory Group helped provide oversight of the recommendations, integrating activity into its work programme where appropriate.

## Improving Outcomes for Children website

One of the recommendations of the Public Accounts Committee was for greater availability of information and transparency about the Improving Outcomes for Children programme. To share the learning and outcomes from the programme, an Annual Report was published in 2019 and a website for practitioners and the public was launched, hosted by Social Care Wales ([www.socialcare.wales/service-improvement/improving-outcomes-for-children-programme](http://www.socialcare.wales/service-improvement/improving-outcomes-for-children-programme)). This is a useful resource and contains an overview of the programme, research, evidence and achievements to date to help inform practice and professional development.

## 7. Conclusion

This report highlights the breadth and scale of the work undertaken through the Improving Outcomes for Children programme, supported by the Ministerial Advisory Group. It is clear our strategic approach has been successful in raising the profile of looked after children at all levels and highlighting the contributions required across sectors and policy portfolios.

During this period, two Cabinet Papers have been presented (Improving Outcomes for Children [2017] and Extending Corporate Parenting across the Public Sector [2019]) setting out the need for a strategic cross-government, cross sector approach at all levels of government. These clearly set out the need for placing children's welfare at the heart of all policy decisions, recognising that children are the future of Wales.

As we come to the end of this Assembly Term and the life-cycle of the programme, it is timely to consider what comes next. There has been many positive developments as a direct result of our cross-government leadership. We now need to take this to the next level to ensure all policy areas are delivering to help reduce the numbers of children in care as a core policy commitment. To help drive this activity at a policy level, a Delivery Board is being established by Welsh Government to help promote the cross-government activity that is required to support improved outcomes for care experienced children.

A wider stakeholder group, akin to the Ministerial Advisory Group, will need to inform and direct the work that is still in train. Whilst not an exhaustive list, the following legacy items have been clearly identified:

1. Reducing the numbers of children in care in Wales
2. Sufficiency of Fostering Provision
3. Accommodation for Children with complex needs
4. Continued development of Adoption services and support
5. Educational Attainment
6. Corporate Parenting
7. Housing options for care leavers

Further consideration is needed on the appropriate cross-government forum required. Given the clear focus on strengthening corporate parenting across the public sector in the next Assembly Term, and the impact of our cross-sector approach in this term, a clear corporate parenting theme to the work and membership should be considered.

We know that the impact of COVID-19 will likely be long lasting and continue to place enormous pressures on vulnerable children and families and the services in place to support them. Mitigating the impact of the pandemic will continue to be a key priority in the new Senedd term.