



Protecting Babies, Children and Young People

NSPCC Cymru's key policy priorities
for the next Welsh Government

MAE POB PLENTYNDOD WERTH BRWYDRO DROSTO
EVERY CHILDHOOD IS WORTH FIGHTING FOR

Contents

Introduction	3
Transforming children’s social care	4
Supporting babies to have the best start in life	6
Preventing and responding to all forms of child sexual abuse	8
Supporting children and young people to recover from abuse and neglect	11
Endnotes	13

Introduction

We believe that every childhood is worth fighting for. Abuse and neglect can and should be prevented so that every baby, child and young person can reach their potential. No one thing can predict abuse or neglect. However, we do know that babies, children and young people growing up in homes affected by poverty, domestic abuse, substance misuse or mental health problems are at a higher risk. When these risks are combined with the existing strain on local services, the implications for babies, children and young people are worrying.

Over the past few years there have been numerous tragic cases involving the deaths of babies, children and young people. These children were failed by the adults around them, including those who were supposed to take care of them, and the agencies and statutory bodies whose job it is to protect them. It must not take yet more tragedies to keep child protection firmly on the political agenda. We need to create a strong social safety net that protects babies, children from harm, and supports stable, loving family life. For babies, children and young people that have experienced abuse or neglect, support needs to be available to help them recover and move towards a brighter future.

There are ways to strengthen safeguarding and child protection with examples of positive practice from across the UK and beyond, found in a growing evidence base of what works to prevent abuse and support children.

But we cannot achieve the level of change needed without significant action by political leaders and government. Cross-party commitment is needed to strengthen protections for babies, children and young people. Their voices and experiences must be heard within the corridors of power and their views must be considered in all decisions affecting them.

A Government that champions children:

Together with other children's charities in Wales, we are urging the next Welsh Government to make babies, children and young people a priority. We ask politicians to commit to:

- a Cabinet Minister for babies, children and young people to provide strong leadership and direction, promote and champion their rights and be accountable for delivering better outcomes.
- a Cabinet Committee for babies, children and young people to ensure that their rights are prioritised and realised across every government department.
- a cross-party Senedd scrutiny committee for babies, children and young people who will hold ministers accountable for the decisions that they make.

Transforming children's social care



The next Welsh Government should invest in early intervention services to support families before they reach crisis point.

Families in Wales face ever-growing challenges. The 8th annual child poverty survey paints a bleak picture: practitioners describe the current situation as “without an end in sight” and families “trapped in a negative cycle of debt, poor housing and stress relating to very basic living needs; all of which contributes to a complete lack of control over their own life outcomes”¹. NSPCC Cymru considers poverty to be a preventable, structural harm which negatively impacts children and can put them at increased risk. There is a clear, evidential link between poverty and child abuse and neglect. A lack of resources can prevent families from being able to provide adequately for their children, and the stress of financial insecurity can overload families, affecting relationships. Living in poverty means parents are not having their needs met, in turn, this can impact their capacity to care for their child.

The next Welsh Government must consider the role poverty plays in increasing risk of abuse and neglect for children and how anti-poverty work can help keep children safer.

Key figures:

- 31% of children in Wales live in poverty.²
- The number of children in care in Wales has increased by 25% between 2014 and 2024.³
- Despite the 4.5% increase in the next local government settlement, councils continue to face a £560m gap in funding for 2025/26.⁴

In these times of financial hardship, creating a social safety net around our most vulnerable families has never been more important. However, social care spend is under real pressure given the rise in demand for services. In its latest annual report, Care Inspectorate Wales highlights that “prioritising investment in early help is still under significant pressure as services struggle to meet people’s immediate need for care and support to ensure they are safe and their well-being promoted.”⁵ We are aware councils face huge financial pressures and the limited money available is increasingly being used to tackle the provision of urgent help for children and families already at crisis, however funding early intervention is also vitally important for supporting families and protecting vulnerable children.

We want to see early and adequate support to create a social safety net for families who are struggling. **Intervening early to stop abuse and neglect, at the first indication that a family is struggling and funding adequate service provision must be a key priority for the next Welsh Government.** We know, through evaluation and testing, that effective early intervention can improve outcomes for children and families - while failing to intervene at an early stage can lead to a multitude of negative consequences later in life.⁶

The next Welsh Government should ensure sufficient workforce recruitment and retention as well as adequate training so staff can understand and respond to the multiple challenges faced by babies, children and young people in Wales.

Recruitment and retention of staff continues to be a major issue for local authorities across Wales, particularly for children’s services: an increasing number of practitioners are newly qualified and inexperienced, which exacerbates difficulties linked with increased demand and more complex cases.

In 2024, Social Care Wales undertook research to understand the challenges in recruitment and retention of social care workers in Wales.⁷ The report found that factors like low pay, low status, the level of responsibility and long hours are stopping people from wanting to join the social care sector. In a survey of social workers carried out in the same year⁸, only 48 per cent suggested they had the right staff to deliver services and 55 per cent felt able to meet the needs of the people they care for and support. **We want to see the next Welsh Government redouble its efforts to ensure that there are adequate numbers of confident staff to support babies, children and young people and their families.**

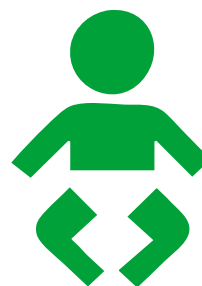
The next Welsh Government should resource multi-agency child safeguarding arrangements and introduce a new information sharing duty so that professionals in health, policing, children's social services, education and others can work better together to keep children safe.

In Wales, all 22 local authorities are engaged in multi-agency collaborative working. However, child practice reviews consistently bring out issues relating to effective information sharing and multi-agency working. For example, multi-agency practice and information sharing was identified as a key theme in the reviews into the deaths of Logan Mwangi, Lola James and Kaylea Titford. These reviews show that key information was not shared between agencies which critically affected ability to respond.

Multi-agency safeguarding arrangements must be strengthened with greater accountability and improved data sharing. **We want to see the next Welsh Government introduce an information sharing duty and a single child identifier (SUI), as is currently proposed in England.** Child safeguarding is far too important for one professional or agency to do alone. By working together, children's social care, health, housing, policing and education can piece together a fuller picture of the realities of children's lives, leading to better decision making and support. It is also really important that children's services and adult services work in a joined-up way to deliver holistic support to children and families. However, embedding effective joint working practices across the country takes dedicated time, investment, and strong leadership. **We need to see strong leadership from all safeguarding partners and better resourcing of multi-agency safeguarding arrangements by the next Welsh Government.** Learning and improving must be hardwired into culture, policy and processes.

NSPCC Cymru values the vital role that everyone must play in safeguarding children in Wales. We want to work with statutory partners and communities to prevent further child deaths, harm and abuse, ensuring all children.

Supporting babies to have the best start in life



A baby's environment and experiences in their first 1000 days of their life shapes their future intellectual, emotional and social development, which can impact on the opportunities that they will have and their physical and mental health⁹. Babies need safe, stable and loving home environments with nurturing relationships with their caregivers to promote their healthy development. However, some families face challenges such as poverty, perinatal mental health problems, domestic abuse and trauma that can make it harder for them to meet their baby's needs. Without appropriate support for families, babies can become vulnerable to experiencing adversity, trauma, abuse and neglect. That is why the provision of high-quality parent-infant relationship and perinatal mental health services are needed to help tackle health inequalities and to help set children on a positive developmental trajectory.

The next Welsh Government should ensure new and expectant parents struggling with their mental health can get the right support

New and expectant parents are disproportionately at risk of experiencing poor mental health, with 1 in 5 mums¹⁰ and 1 in 10 dads/partners affected¹¹. If left undetected and untreated, perinatal mental health problems can have a devastating impact on the mental and physical health of mums, their partners and their babies. Untreated perinatal mental health problems are one of the risk factors for problems in early relationships¹². Experiencing poor maternal mental health can make it harder for parents to provide babies with the sensitive and attuned care they need. This has the potential to affect a babies emotional, social and cognitive development¹³ and can increase the risk of child maltreatment. But the risks to parents and their babies are not inevitable and can be avoided or reduced by effective early intervention¹⁴. Timely support is important for all parents and their babies who are experiencing mental health problems, from mild through to severe. Despite progress, the work to develop perinatal mental health care in Wales is not complete, and significant gaps in support remain. For example, none of the Specialist Perinatal Mental Health Teams are meeting Type One of the CCQI Standards for Perinatal Mental Health Services¹⁵, which are the minimum standards needed to ensure patient safety, rights, dignity, the law and fundamentals of care¹⁶. The next Welsh Government should ensure that specialist perinatal mental health services in Wales are fully resourced so they can meet quality standards, and be accessible for all, including dads and partners.

The next Welsh Government should roll out specialist parent-infant relationship services across Wales to support babies most at risk

Some families in Wales currently face significant challenges such as poverty, trauma and abuse, which can make it harder for them to provide the sensitive and attuned care that babies need. It is estimated that at least 1 in 10 babies are living in fear and distress now¹⁷, but there is not enough specialist support for vulnerable babies and their families¹⁸. Only three areas in Wales (Gwent, Cardiff and Wrexham and Flintshire) have a specialist parent-infant relationship service that can support families experiencing severe, complex and/or enduring difficulties in their early relationships, where babies' emotional wellbeing and development is particularly at risk¹⁹. Investment is needed by the next Welsh Government to develop a more equitable offer of specialist support across Wales²⁰. These vital services offer direct support to families who need specialised help in strengthening the relationship with their babies, as well as using their expertise

to upskill the local workforce to understand and support parent-infant relationships²¹. Research has also shown that investing in support for families in the earliest years, creates better economic outcomes and reduces the need for later spending²².

The next Welsh Government should protect babies and very young children from poverty

Three in ten children in Wales are living in poverty (31%)²³, making it one of the most significant and persistent issues that families are facing²⁴, and worryingly very deep poverty is rising²⁵. It is the youngest children that are more likely to be at risk of being in poverty²⁶, with 40% of children under age 5 living in poverty in Wales²⁷. Experiencing poverty at any age can cause harm to children, but this can be particularly acute for babies, as their experiences in the first 1000 days can shape their lifelong well-being²⁸. Poverty can negatively impact healthy development and can affect a child's life chances including lower education attainment, poorer health and wellbeing and economic outcomes²⁹. The next Welsh Government should focus on addressing early childhood poverty in Wales to ensure all babies can have the best start in life.

Preventing and responding to all forms of child sexual abuse



The next Welsh Government should retain a holistic child sexual abuse strategy so everyone works together to keep babies, children and young people safe.

Child sexual abuse is devastating and can have both short and long-term effects. The impact of sexual abuse can last a lifetime and affect psychological and physical well-being, family and intimate relationships. Some studies³⁰ suggest it takes on average eight years to disclose abuse and some children never feel able to tell anybody about it.

CSA remains hidden and under reported:

Key figures:

- In 2023/24, an estimated 500,000 children experienced child sexual abuse in England and Wales.³¹
- Despite this, just 199 children – 15% fewer than in the previous year – were placed on the child protection register solely or partly because of concerns about sexual abuse, representing 5% of all registrations.³²

A public health approach to child sexual abuse sets out everybody's responsibilities in tackling it. Policies and procedures must both disrupt potential perpetrators and enable disclosure from children and young people in all the places children access. Babies, children and young people also need a model of support which spans the spaces and peers they interact with and connects the whole community in keeping them safe. Preventative approaches should also consider the contextual and community factors, outside of the family setting, which could put babies, children and young people at risk.

We want the next Welsh Government to ensure a continued public health approach to child sexual abuse and retain a strong, adequately funded strategy to prevent and tackle all forms of child sexual abuse.

The next Welsh Government should continue to prioritise prevention of online child sexual abuse and exploitation and align it as part of a public health response

The online world is an integral part of children's lives. Children and young people learn, play, and socialise online – they are clear that they enjoy many benefits from social media, messaging apps, gaming services and access to the wider online world. Many children do not distinguish between their 'online' and 'offline' worlds, with both parts informing who they are and their life experiences. As well as benefits, the online world also carries risks to children's safety which must be addressed. The scale of risk and harm that children continue to face online is unacceptable. With so many children using social networks, gaming and messaging sites, young people are increasingly exposed to the threat of abuse, from both adults and their peers.

Key figures:

- More than 2,000 child sexual abuse image crimes were logged by police forces in Wales in the past year, equating to around six per day.³³
- In offences where the police recorded the platform used, exactly half (50%) took place on Snapchat and a quarter on Meta products- 11% on Instagram, 7% on Facebook and 6% on WhatsApp.³⁴
- Over 550 Sexual Communication with a Child offences were recorded by police forces in Wales in 2023/24 - more than double the amount since 2017/18 when the offence first came into force.

Ensuring parity of protection for children online and offline requires UK-wide regulation and national prevention and recovery efforts to work in tandem. A Wales-wide approach should bring together education, child safeguarding and law enforcement to foster a preventive and protective environment and keep children safe online. **We want the next Welsh Government to provide clear leadership on prevention and recovery efforts, retaining a strong and ambitious National Child Safety Online Action Plan, updated annually, that complements the Online Safety Act and forms a key plank of the wider public health approach to preventing child sexual abuse in all its forms.**

Child safety online policy must include innovation and specific actions to keep pace with the intensifying and ever-evolving online threat facing our children, particularly in relation to Generative Artificial Intelligence. Wales needs to consider risks as well as opportunities in relation to emerging technologies. **We want the next Welsh Government to introduce a statutory duty of care for Gen AI deployers in Wales.**

Children's experiences online are best understood by speaking directly to them. They have first-hand insight into how technological developments impact them, what is working well to keep them safe, and what is failing. This should be done in a way that is trauma-informed and takes account of children's intersecting experiences. **We want the next Welsh Government to establish formal mechanisms to ensure children and young people are meaningfully consulted in the development and implementation of online safety policy.**

Ensuring that children and young people are receiving parity of protection in a Welsh context means considering any risks and adequacy of responses relating to online communication through the Welsh language, especially as AI begins to shift how we all communicate online. An analysis by NSPCC Cymru of research³⁵ by the Welsh Language Commissioner shows that there are potentially high numbers of children across Wales open to content and contact risks when using Welsh on social media. **We want the next Welsh Government to fund research to build a much-needed knowledge base of children's use of the Welsh language online and the potential risks that they face.**

The next Welsh Government should work with children and young people and their teachers to evaluate the roll out of mandatory Relationships and Sexuality Education, ensuring it is high quality, inclusive and relevant.

Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) is compulsory in schools in Wales, and it has an important role to play in safeguarding children. Children have a right to receive high quality, age appropriate, and inclusive RSE tailored to the realities of their lives. This can play a key role in preventing child sexual abuse including peer-to-peer harmful sexual behaviours.

Learning about healthy bodies and healthy relationships is a core entitlement all children should receive. Educational programmes are an opportunity to make sure

children know that they have a right to be treated with dignity and respect and have the responsibility to treat others the same way. This should start early and build in complexity throughout their education, in line with children's evolving capacity.

Key figures:

- On average, dating and relationship violence prevention activities — such as teaching about healthy relationships in RSHE — reduces violence by 17%.³⁶
- Half of secondary school teachers surveyed in the UK said they do not feel confident delivering sex and relationships education.³⁷
- Many young people describe their school RSE experiences as too little, too late, negative, ineffective, in some cases counterproductive, embarrassing, awkward and irrelevant to their everyday lives.³⁸

However, evidence suggests that professionals do not feel confident in delivering RSE, which risks leading to inconsistent provision and leaving some children and young people without the protective knowledge they have a right to receive. We want the Welsh Government to continuously evaluate the roll out of mandatory RSE in Wales, working with children and young people and their teachers, to ensure that they are getting high quality, inclusive and relevant provision.

Supporting children and young people to recover from abuse and neglect



The next Welsh Government should ensure that babies, children and young people who have experienced abuse and neglect feel heard, understood and supported.

Research shows that children's disclosures of abuse and neglect can often be complicated, fragmented³⁹ and not always direct or verbal.⁴⁰ Children often describe the fear of not being listened to or taken seriously, as a key barrier to speaking out about their experiences.⁴¹ When young people do attempt to disclose abuse and neglect, it can often go unrecognised, unheard or ignored, meaning that no action is taken to protect or support that young person.⁴²

Childline plays a crucial role in supporting children and young people who have suffered abuse and neglect by listening to them and empowering them. It is crucial that Childline is recognised as part of the network of support around children and families and **we want the next Welsh Government to ensure long term sustainable funding to continue to meet need.**

Everyone in children's lives can play their part and keep them safe from abuse and neglect. Tragic child deaths, including those of Logan Mwangi and Lola James, highlight the need to prevent missed safeguarding opportunities that can have a devastating impact on children, families, communities, and the professionals supporting them. However, the public are often unable to make the most of safeguarding opportunities. This is a consistent theme across the 2,000 Case Reviews within the NSPCC's national repository. Barriers experienced include a lack of understanding, fear of repercussions, uncertainty on whether concerns are valid, and negative views of statutory services. First language can equally be a barrier to accessing services. It is important that all members of the public can confidently and easily report concerns in their preferred language, and that services are available in the Welsh medium.

NSPCC's adult helpline can play an invaluable role to support the work of child protection authorities and help adults protect children from harm. It is staffed by trained professionals who can provide expert advice to adults who are concerned about a child, and identify if a case meets the threshold for intervention and refer those on to statutory authorities. In Wales, the number of referrals being made by our NSPCC helpline each month to external agencies, such as the police and local authorities, about the abuse of children has, on average, risen by almost 80% since lockdown. **We want the next Welsh Government to fund enhanced bilingual capacity for the NSPCC Helpline in Wales, so it can enable the community to overcome barriers such as fear, uncertainty or validity.** This will help keep children safe by listening to the family members, community and network of professionals around them, making the most of their insight, knowledge and voice.

The next Welsh Government should guarantee access to therapeutic services for young victims of child sexual abuse and domestic abuse, including by ensuring more children and young people can access joined-up, child-centred support "under one roof".

Children and young people who are victims of abuse (including sexual or domestic abuse) have lived through trauma and often struggle to access support that is equipped to deal with their unique needs. Abuse is never the fault or responsibility of the child yet children who have experienced abuse may feel guilt, confusion or shame. They may not understand what has happened to them or recognise it as abuse.

Key figures

- Children and young people experience the highest rates of domestic violence of any age group.⁴³
- In the last financial year, 349 children and young people were on waiting lists in Wales for support from the domestic abuse and sexual violence sector.⁴⁴
- Waiting times for services for children who have been sexually abused look to have more than doubled since 2015.⁴⁵

Experiencing domestic abuse in the home can have a serious impact on children's mental health and wellbeing. There is currently a lack of service provision for child survivors of domestic abuse across Wales. This is despite UK and Welsh legislation recognising children as victims of domestic abuse and placing a responsibility on the public sector to respond to violence and abuse. Evidence from the specialist sector shows that the funding for service provision for children and young people is patchy and inconsistent. More specialised, therapeutic support is needed for children and young people experiencing domestic abuse.

Services for children who have experienced sexual abuse also remain few and far between and there is a lack of system-wide, sustainable funding for services specifically for children and young people. The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) found that victims of child sexual abuse can be two to four times more likely to become victims of sexual, physical, or emotional abuse again in their lifetime⁴⁶. One of IICSA's key recommendations in their final report was for Welsh Government to guarantee specialist therapeutic support for child victims of sexual abuse. In its response, Welsh Government has pointed to the ongoing work to develop paediatric provision in Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARCs) but this has not, to date, included a guarantee of therapeutic support which is crucial for supporting all survivors.

SARCs are available across North, South and Mid and West Wales, but their current ability to provide support to children under 18 varies widely across these regions. While police forces in Wales recorded almost 6,000 child sexual abuse offences in 2023/24, the eight SARCs in Wales supported 1,021 under-18s for the same period.

As the next Welsh Government and key partners map out future therapeutic provision for children who have experienced sexual abuse, it will be crucial to consider how they can ensure the pan-Wales provision of readily available, integrated, child centred, specialist sexual abuse services. The Lighthouse in London is an example of an innovative approach to supporting children to recover after abuse. The Child House model is child-centred, interdisciplinary, brings together a multi-agency response and provides a safe-place for children and young people to recover⁴⁷. **We want to see learning from the child house model inform the roll out of support services for child victims of sexual abuse.**

Endnotes

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“Everyone who comes into contact with children and young people has a responsibility to keep them safe. At the NSPCC, we help individuals and organisations to do this.

We provide a range of online and face-to-face training courses. We keep you up-to-date with the latest child protection policy, practice and

research and help you to understand and respond to your safeguarding challenges. And we share our knowledge of what works to help you deliver services for children and families.

It means together we can help children who’ve been abused to rebuild their lives. Together we can protect children at risk. And, together, we can find the best ways of preventing child abuse from ever happening.

But it’s only with your support, working together, that we can be here to make children safer right across the UK.”

nspcc.org.uk