



Response to

**Raising the educational attainment of children who are
looked after in Wales**

Date: April 2015

NSPCC Cymru/Wales,
Diane Englehardt House,
Treglown Court,
Dowlais Road,
Cardiff CF24 5LQ

Tel: 02920 108 161 Email: publicaffairs.cymru@nspcc.org.uk

**MAE POB PLENTYNDOD WERTH BRWYDRO DROS
EVERY CHILDHOOD IS WORTH FIGHTING FOR**

About the NSPCC

We're leading the fight against child abuse in the UK and Channel Islands. We help children who've been abused to rebuild their lives, we protect children at risk, and we find the best ways of preventing child abuse from ever happening.

Abuse ruins childhood, but it can be prevented. That's why we're here. That's what drives all our work, and that's why – as long as there's abuse – we will fight for every childhood.

We help children rebuild their lives, and we find ways to prevent abuse from ruining any more. So when a child needs **a helping hand, we'll be there.** When **parents are finding it tough, we'll help.** When **laws need to change, or governments need to do more, we won't give up** until things improve. Abuse changes childhood. But so can we.

Introduction: the need for a comprehensive strategy for children in care in Wales

NSPCC Cymru/Wales is pleased to have the opportunity to respond to this consultation on raising the attainment and educational achievements of children who are looked after.

We agree with the Welsh Government that it is crucial to ensure that children who are looked after can achieve good educational outcomes.

However, we see this as **only one component of an overarching strategy** for ensuring that children in care can fulfil their potential. This strategy should aim to enhance the well-being of looked after children.

Research has shown that children learn better if their well-being is fulfilled: three large scale reviews of research on the impact of social and emotional learning (SEL) programmes on elementary and middle-school students in the United States show that *"SEL programmes improved students' social-emotional skills, attitudes about self and others, connection to school, positive social behaviour, and academic performance. (...) SEL programming improved students' achievement test scores by 11 to 17 percentile points, indicating that they offer students a practical educational benefit."*¹

Well-being is defined in section 2 of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 as:

- Physical and mental health and emotional well-being;
- Protection from abuse and neglect;
- Education, training and recreation;
- Domestic, family and personal relationships;
- Contribution made to society;
- Securing rights and entitlements;
- Social and economic well-being;
- Suitability of living accommodation;

In relation to a child, well-being also means:

- Physical, intellectual, social and behavioural development;
- **"welfare" as that word is interpreted for the purposes of the Children Act 1989.**

¹ Durlack, A. et al. (2008) The positive impact of Social and Emotional Learning for Kindergarten to Eighth-Grade Students.

In our view, the key question is: **what kind of care system do we need to fulfil all aspects of the well-being of children who are looked after and care leavers, and how do we put it in place?**

We very much hope to see a comprehensive strategy from Welsh Government which ensures that children who are looked after and care leavers can achieve positive outcomes in all the areas listed above.

We would like to highlight three areas we feel such a strategy should urgently address:

- Emotional well-being: developing a care system which meets the emotional well-being of looked after children.
- Protection from abuse and neglect: children who return home from care.
- Securing rights and entitlements: access to independent advocacy.

1. Emotional well-being: developing a care system which meets the emotional well-being of looked after children.

A high proportion of children in care in the UK have mental health problems that require professional support (over 70 per cent of children entering care according to one study)².

There is also a growing body of evidence on the key factors that influence **looked after children's emotional wellbeing and** mental health. These include:

- Pre-care experiences and continuing relationships with the birth family
- The age at which children enter care
- The quality of children's relationships while in care
- Children's experience of stability or instability while in care
- Children's sense of being listened to and having a say in decision-making
- Children's access to therapeutic services and other forms of support

However, while our knowledge of risk factors for poor mental health and **our understanding of 'what works' in improving looked after children's wellbeing** is increasing, until now there has been little attempt to

² Sempik, J, Ward, H and Darker, I, (2008) 'Emotional and behavioural difficulties of children and young people at entry to care', *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 13, no 2, 221–33.

systematically 'redesign' the care system to ensure that these emotional needs are prioritised in the way that we deliver care.

The NSPCC is engaged in a **research project which seeks to identify the nature of looked after children and young people's emotional and mental health needs, how these needs can be met most effectively, and what action can be taken to improve support, including changes to national policy and service redesign at a local level.** The project involves four local authorities across England and Wales (three in England, one in Wales).

This project aims to consolidate the existing evidence-base on 'what works' in meeting the emotional needs of looked after children, and identify how these messages from research can be translated into practice, through system redesign (at national and local levels) to create a more pro-active, preventative and cost-effective care system.

We are seeking to answer the following questions:

- What would a care system that prioritises emotional wellbeing look like?
- 'What works' in preventing children in care from developing mental health problems and in addressing pre-existing emotional and mental health problems that children have when they enter care?
- How can we ensure that care planning prioritises the emotional needs of looked after children?
- Which types of placements need to be made available to meet the emotional needs of looked after children?
- What kind of training and support do social workers and carers need to enable them to meet the emotional and mental health needs of the children they care for?
- Which kinds of universal and specialist services are effective (and cost-effective) in meeting looked after children's emotional and mental health needs?
- How can local authorities and their partner health agencies ensure that the right infrastructure of services is resourced and made available to looked after children and their carers?

The NSPCC is now drawing all the evidence from the field work and will publish a report in June with recommendations for change. We will be delighted to share these with the Welsh Government.

2. Protection from abuse and neglect: children who return home from care.

A comprehensive strategy on looked after children should contain clear guidelines about monitoring and supporting children who return home from care; there is currently a policy void around reunification in Wales.

However, it is important to acknowledge that the majority of children who leave care return home to live with a parent, relative or other person with parental responsibility. Statistics show that in the last 3 years, more than half of children leaving care did return home (51%).

Unfortunately, returning home does not seem to guarantee stability for children. A recent request from NSPCC Cymru/Wales to Stats Wales shows that 27% of children who went home in 2008/09 had returned to care by 31st March 2014. Figures also show huge variations between local authorities: in some areas, only 14% of children who went home 5 years ago have returned to care, but in others, nearly half have returned (47%).

Failed attempts to return children home from care can cause them lasting harm. Repeatedly moving in and out of care has a profoundly damaging impact on our most vulnerable children.

The NSPCC has been supporting local authorities to improve reunification practice in England since 2012. Together with the University of Bristol and the University of Loughborough, the NSPCC has created a reunification practice framework for local authorities, and is currently working with 9 local authorities in England on implementing this framework.

Drawing on the evidence from UK work, NSPCC Cymru/Wales has been calling for Regulations under section 84 of the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014 to include provisions for better monitoring and support for children who return home from care, and are engaged in conversations with the Delivering Policy for Children and Adults Directorate in the Welsh Government.

Key to supporting children who return home from care to stay with their families **is measuring how well local authorities monitor and support them. There is currently a lack of data being routinely collected about children who return home from care. Better data would allow managers to target resources on those children and families who are most likely to be in need of a more intensive**

service. Better data collection would also allow local authorities to measure the impact of their reunification practice.

Data should be captured through measuring the performance of social services as outlined in the draft Code of Practice which was recently out for consultation.

To ensure greater clarity, NSPCC Cymru/Wales **feels that a number of performance measures should be added to quality standard 5** (*"local authorities must support people who need care and support and carers who need support to safely develop and maintain healthy domestic, family and personal relationships"*):

Group 1: children who cease to be looked after when they return home

- How many children returned home from care each year in the previous 3 years?
- How many of the children who return home, re-entered care?
- What was the length of stay at home before returning to care? (less than 3 months, 3-6 months, 6-12 months etc)
- What are the need codes for children who return home from care and for those who re-enter care?
- What was the status for these children at the point at which they returned home (did they have eligible needs for care and support, were they on a child protection plan?)
- How many children experienced further episodes of return home and re-entry into care?

Group 2: Children who are placed with parents on return home:

- How many children were placed with parents in the previous 3 years?
- How many of these placements with parents broke down?
- What were the placement outcomes for these children?
- How many of the children placed with parents had their care order discharged?
- How many of them re-entered care?

For group 1 and group 2:

- percentage of children who were returned to their families in the last year with a care and support plan in place.
- percentage of children who were still in contact with and receiving support from social services one year after returning home.

- Percentage of children who receive support from social services one year after returning home and who are achieving the well-being outcomes in their care and support plan.

Data on children who return home from care should form part of local authorities' annual reports under Part 1, Chapter 6 of the draft Regulation and Inspection of Social Care (Wales) Bill 2015, and we have made comments to that effect in our response to the current Stage 1 scrutiny of the Bill in the National Assembly for Wales.

With an appropriate care and support plan in place, and robust monitoring and reporting on practice and performance, we can ensure that vulnerable children and their families are supported to stay together in a way which safeguards and promotes children's well-being.

3. Securing rights and entitlements: access to independent advocacy

The Children's Commissioner for Wales' enquiry into access to independent advocacy for looked after children and care leavers, "Missing Voices" carried out between 2012 and 2014, highlights that vulnerable children and young people are not accessing services they are entitled to receive. In the last progress report published in July 2014, the Commissioner expressed disappointment that improvement had been slow and that too many children and young people still were not accessing independent advocacy.

The recent investigations into historic child abuse highlighted the importance of victims' voices being heard and believed. We cannot effectively safeguard and protect children in care and care leavers if they do not have access to services which help them articulate very difficult experiences and be actively involved in determining how their well-being outcomes can be met.

Children in care and care leavers have a right to access independent advocacy. A strategy for children who are looked after must ensure that that right is a reality.

Conclusion:

We are **concerned by the Welsh Government's focus on attainment rather than seeking to enhance well-being.** Research³ we have conducted as part of the Welsh Neglect Project on developing early support in education and early years services for children experiencing

³ Newbury, forthcoming

low-level neglect shows that vulnerable young people feel that schools are focussing too much on grades and attainment:

You could probably put a child **in front of their faces and they'd be blind** to it. You could probably stand there with a massive sign over your head-'**Young carer**'- and you could walk around the whole school and **teachers would be like "Oh, alright bud?", and they don't care. All they care about is grades and attendance and that. Young Carer**

NSPCC Cymru/Wales believes that an overarching, holistic strategy is needed to ensure that the well-being outcomes of children who are looked after and care leavers are met and they are able to fulfil their potential.

We would like to see the emphasis moving to what care can and should deliver for our most vulnerable children. We are **concerned by the focus on driving the numbers of looked after children down**. Having low numbers of children in care can be a result of effective early intervention and family support strategies, but could also be an indicator of high **thresholds, which could be detrimental to children's well-being**. There is a danger that having too strong a focus on the number of children in care could lead to thresholds getting higher, and children being left in abusive situations for too long.