

Listen. Act. Thrive.

The Emotional and Mental Health of Care Experienced Children and Young People

Research has repeatedly found that, care experienced children and young people¹ have higher rates of mental health problems than the general population.² In Wales, 67.5 per cent of all care experienced children and young people were looked after because of abuse or neglect.³ There is strong evidence suggesting that abuse and neglect are leading causes of poor mental health in childhood and into adulthood.⁴

In 2014, Wales became the first UK nation to require that the mental health of children and young people is assessed upon entry into care.⁵

*“We are not troubled teenagers, it’s what we have been through”
(young person)*

Aim of the Project

This project forms part of the work programme of the Improving Outcomes for Children Ministerial Advisory Group (MAG). NSPCC Cymru/Wales worked with Voices from Care Cymru to explore how care experienced children and young people’s emotional and mental health needs are being assessed and supported. We consulted 21 care experienced young people (aged 15-21), and carried out surveys with 26 looked after children nurses and 44 Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) in Wales.

This briefing provides an overview of the key findings and recommendations to assist the MAG with their work. Later in 2019, a more detailed report will be published.

Findings

Care experienced children and young people told us they are not receiving the emotional and mental health support they need. Key issues identified during the consultation include: health assessments, access to services, training, and multi-agency working.

“I have never seen any guidance or received any formal training regarding emotional and mental health.” (looked after children nurse)

Mental Health Assessments

Under the *Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014*, every child or young person in care must receive a health assessment, which includes mental health.⁶ The findings from this project suggest that health assessments are not adequately assessing the emotional and mental health of care experienced children and young people. We found that the tools being used to assess children and young people’s emotional and mental health varied and there is insufficient clarity for practitioners about how they should assess emotional and mental health.

Looked after children nurses identified time as a key issue in relation to health assessments. They feel that insufficient time is allocated to carry out a full assessment of physical and mental health.

“Health assessments capture physical health and rarely mental health and emotional wellbeing” (IRO)

Access to Services

Care experienced young people described how difficult it is to access specialist mental health services across Wales. All participants talked about how challenging it is for those in care to access CAMHS services because of the high threshold for referral.

Many spoke about needing to have a mental health diagnosis or be in 'crisis' before receiving support.

They spoke about long waiting times to access CAMHS and how a young person would be placed at the bottom of the waiting list if they moved placements. The care experienced young people felt that GP's do not listen to them and are too quick to prescribe anti-depressants.

"there is nothing there to support others without a diagnosis all we get is refusals from CAMHS to see children" (looked after children nurse)

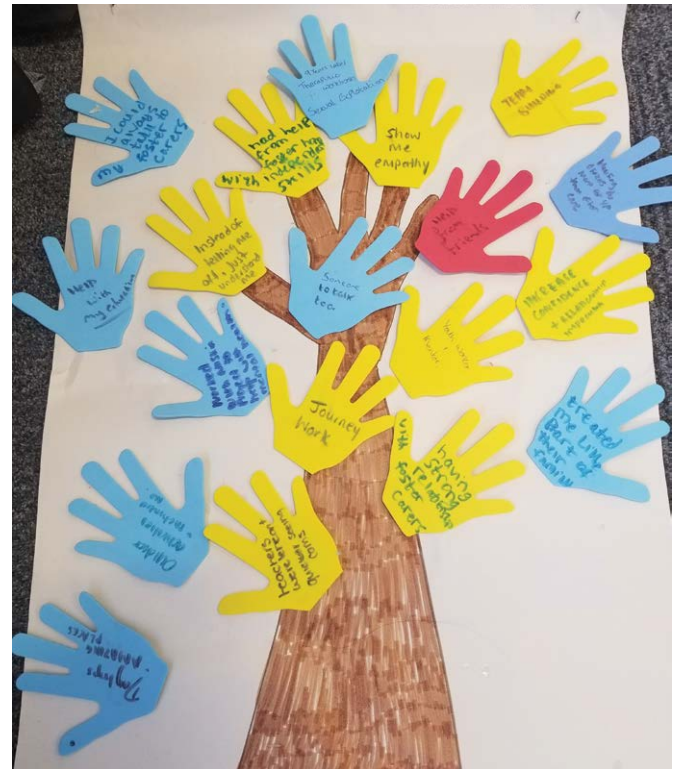
"Takes about six months to get into CAMHS" (young person)

"Went to doctors and went straight to anti-depressants" (young person)

Young people stressed how important it is to have priority access or dedicated CAMHS resources for those in the care system, including therapeutic services and counselling. Care experienced young people also talked about the importance of having access to a variety of services to support their mental health, including emotional wellbeing services, such as yoga, the gym and access to outdoor activities.

Training

Young people feel that foster carers, teachers, residential workers and social workers have not been given enough training to equip them with the skills and knowledge necessary to adequately support care experienced children with emotional and mental health difficulties. The looked after children nurses and IROs also called for adults working with care experienced children and young people to receive mental health training on the impact of trauma, together with identification and response to mental



health difficulties. This mental health training should be provided regularly, so professionals have the confidence to support the emotional and mental health of children and young people in their care.

"[There is] more stability for a young person if carers understand behaviours that may come with mental health." (young person)

Multi-Agency Working

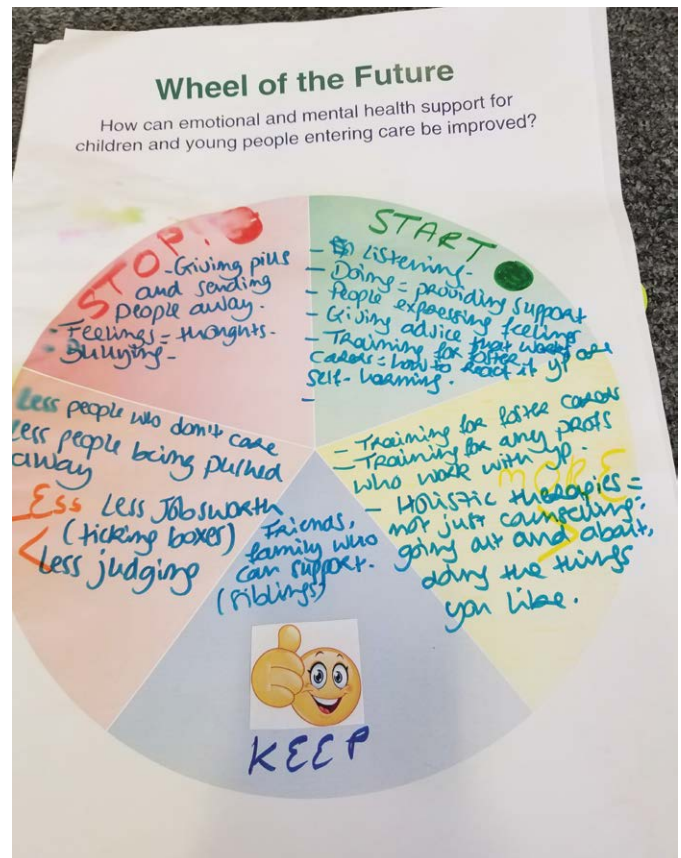
Young people described how agencies supporting care experienced children and young people are not effectively working together and that young people must tell their story multiple times to different adults. Young people said, "it was hard to talk about it [their past] to everyone." Additionally, looked after children nurses and IROs discussed how this disjointed approach limits the ability to comprehensively support children and young people in care. Children and young people talked about the need for Health, Social Services, and Education to work together more effectively to provide seamless support.

"Professionals to work together so young people don't have to repeat their story." (young person)

Recommendations

All children have the right to the highest standard of health and those who have been abused and neglected should receive appropriate help and support.⁷ The recent National Assembly for Wales' Children, Young People and Education Committee *Mind Over Matter Report* discussed how the services offered to children and young people in care are at "breaking point" and "in crisis."⁸ We recognise that government is working to respond to the recommendations in the Report⁹ but corporate parents have an obligation to act. To enable care experienced children and young people to thrive we recommend that:

- An expert panel from the Together for Children and Young People, Early Intervention and Resilience Workstream should work with the Welsh Government to:
 - Review how emotional and mental health of care experienced children and young people is currently being assessed and
 - Develop a comprehensive **emotional and mental health assessment framework** which will include an evidence based assessment of need.
- Regional Partnership Boards should fund **dedicated CAMHS resources** for care experienced children and young people.
- Care experienced children and young people must be involved in the planning of improved mental health services.
- Local authorities as corporate parents, health, social services, and education, should work together to provide a **joined-up approach** to emotional and mental health services and support to care experienced children and young people.
- **Training** should be provided to adults working with care experienced children and young people so that they have the skills and confidence to respond to emotional and mental health needs.
- Care experienced children and young people should also be offered access to **emotional wellbeing services** like yoga, outdoor activities, mindfulness, and painting.



Any Questions?

Please contact NSPCC Wales Policy and Public Affairs Team:
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1 A child or young person who is or has been in the care of their local authority.
 2 Luke et al (2014) What works in preventing and treating poor mental health in looked after children? P.7
 3 Bentley, H. et al (2018) How Safe are our children? London: NSPCC., p.55
 4 Gilbert, et al. (2009) Burden and consequences of child maltreatment in high-income countries. The Lancet, 373(9,657), pp.68–81.
 5 Social Services and Wellbeing Act (Wales) 2014 (see also, The Children and Young Persons Wales: Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (Wales) Order 2015, SI 1818 (W.261), part 2, section 7.
 6 The Children and Young Persons Wales: Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (Wales) Order 2015, SI 1818 (W.261), part 2, section 7.
 7 Under Article 39 of the UNCRC, children who have been neglected, abused or exploited should receive special help to physically and psychologically recover and reintegrated into society.
 8 Children, Young people and Education Committee, Mind Over Matter: A report on the step change needed in emotional and mental health support for children and young people in Wales, p.118 (<https://www.assemblywales.org/laid%20documents/cr-ld11522/cr-ld11522-e.pdf>)
 9 *Id.*

