



**NSPCC**

NSPCC Cymru/Wales Briefing

# **Achieving emotional well-being for looked after children**

A whole system approach

By Louise Bazalgette, Tom Rahilly and Grace Trevelyan  
June 2015

**EVERY CHILDHOOD IS WORTH FIGHTING FOR**

## Achieving emotional well-being for looked after children: a whole system approach

Looked after children (LAC) in the UK are at greater risk of experiencing poor mental health than children in the general population.<sup>1</sup> In Wales, one comprehensive study of the mental health of looked after children identified that 49% of children looked after by local authorities were identified as having a mental health disorder.<sup>2</sup> Recent figures from the Children in Need Census for Wales 2014 show that 10-15 year olds had the highest percentage of mental health problems within the LAC population.<sup>3</sup> The high prevalence of mental health disorders among looked after children seems to indicate that their rights under Article 27 of the UNCRC (right to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development) are not being fully realised in practice.

In partnership with four local authorities, three in England, and one in Wales, the NSPCC conducted a programme of field work, interviewing looked after children and care leavers, their carers and professionals from health and social care services, to understand their views on how the care system currently supports young people's emotional well-being and what changes they would like to see. NSPCC also commissioned the Rees Centre in Oxford University to undertake a literature review of evidence on 'what works' in promoting good mental health for looked after children and worked with the four local authorities and their health partners to consider how to translate messages from research into practice and design new ideas for supporting the emotional well-being of looked after children.

Conclusions from the project have been written up into a report, which is available on the NSPCC website. The report explores the causes of poor mental health among looked after children and considers how services in local areas can work

together to promote good emotional well-being for looked after children. It asks:

***How can we achieve good emotional well-being for all children in care?***

***What would a care system that prioritises children's emotional well-being look like?***

This briefing summarises the key issues and priorities arising from the project for Wales.

### Priorities for change

Work with children and young people on this project highlighted that the emotional well-being and mental health of looked after children can be **thought of as something that is the responsibility of specialist mental health services** alone. This must not be the case; we need **a whole system that prioritises the emotional well-being of children in care, across social care and health**. Based on the fieldwork and research for this project, the NSPCC and our local authority partners identified five priorities for change, which would improve support for the emotional well-being of children in care. These are:

- **Embedding an emphasis on emotional well-being throughout the system**
- **Taking a proactive and preventative approach**
- **Giving children and young people voice and influence**
- **Supporting and sustaining children's relationships**
- **Supporting care leavers' emotional needs**

1 Tarren-Sweeney M., and Vetere A., 'Establishing the need for mental health services for children and young people in care, and those who are subsequently adopted.' In 'Mental Health Services for Vulnerable Children and Young People', Ed. Tarren-Sweeney, M., and Vetere, A. London: Routledge, 2014.

2 Meltzer, H., Corbin, T., Gatward, R., Goodman, R., and Ford, T. (2003) The mental health of young people looked after by local authorities in Wales. Office for National Statistics, London: HMSO.

3 <http://gov.wales/docs/statistics/2015/150225-wales-children-need-census-2014-en.pdf>

## Key recommendations for policy and practice

This section summarises our vision for a care system that prioritises looked after children's emotional well-being. This includes key recommendations for policy and practice which were developed in partnership with local authorities. This briefing pulls out and summarises the sections from the report which are relevant to the Welsh context.

### Priority one: embedding an emphasis on emotional well-being throughout the system

Our work has shown that Wales, as well as other nations in the UK, has made some progress in identifying the emotional well-being of looked after children as a priority for national policy. However, more must be done to embed this emphasis on children's emotional well-being at a local level.

**Local authorities and health commissioners should ensure that looked after children's emotional well-being is clearly identified as a strategic priority for their area.** Actions should include:

- **Developing a local strategy about how the emotional well-being of looked after children will be assessed, monitored and supported and ensuring that a spectrum of evidence-based services are commissioned** to respond to looked after children's mental health needs.
- Ensuring that **robust data on the mental health of children who need care and support is gathered and analysed to inform strategic planning**, through the population needs assessments introduced by the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014.

Effective care systems should be able to measure their success in achieving good emotional well-being for looked after children. This should be a key outcome measure for children's social care and local authorities should track how looked after children's emotional well-being changes over time. Mental health and emotional well-being outcome measures are not yet used on a routine basis in the care system in Wales. Therefore, **the Welsh**

**Government should establish a requirement for local authorities to gather robust outcome measures to monitor the emotional well-being and mental health of looked after children through the Outcomes Framework for looked after children which is currently being developed.** Changes in looked after children's well-being should then **feature as a key outcome measure in the annual reports anticipated in the Regulation and Inspection of Social Care (Wales) Bill.**

### Priority two: taking a proactive and preventative approach

**Early assessment** is the critical first step toward a proactive and preventative approach to support looked after children's well-being. Following on from Towards a Stable Life and a Brighter Future, the Social Services and Well-being Act enshrines the need to assess looked after children's mental health and this will come into force in 2016. To support this process, the Welsh Government **should issue guidance on the content of this assessment process and how it should inform care planning.** We will be calling for this in our response to the consultation on the Code of Practice on looked after and accommodated children. When the emotional well-being and mental health needs of looked after children are better understood, a better informed process of placement matching can take place.

We would also like to see looked after children's care and support plans under Part 6 of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 **clearly outline any further assessments or interventions the child or their carer may need.** Independent Reviewing Officers should keep track of actions in the care and support plan to ensure that they are carried out and review progress regularly.

All local authorities, who took part in this project, including our Welsh partner, identified increased access to life story work as a key priority for improving support to looked after children. There should be **clear leadership within local authorities that all looked after children should be supported to complete life story work** from their earliest point in care. **Opportunities for life story work should be available throughout the child's care journey** and during their transition to independence.

### Priority three: Giving children and young people voice and influence

Every child and young person in care has their own individual idea of what contributes to their emotional well-being and what kinds of support will best help them achieve emotional well-being. Social workers and carers should support children to describe what is important to their well-being and how carers and professionals can help. Doing so can empower children and young people to feel more “in charge” of their own well-being and resilience.

In Wales the Welsh Government **has already enshrined an expectation in the 2014 Social Services and Well-being Act that looked after children will be involved in defining their own well-being outcomes. We strongly welcome this, and feel that other administrations in the UK should follow this example** of involving children and young people in defining the outcomes they wish to achieve while they are in care and monitoring progress against the child’s chosen outcomes.

Our work on this project has shown that mental health services have been slow to respond to messages from children and young people about what they want from a service. To ensure they are **designed with young people’s needs and wishes in mind**, local commissioners should **involve looked after children and their carers in the design** of services at every stage of the process, so that children are offered a spectrum of support that meets their needs. These services should be **jointly commissioned by children’s social care, health and education and integrated across the tiers so that young people have easy access to services to promote their resilience<sup>4</sup> as well more intensive therapeutic services** where these are needed. Services should use consistent outcome measures, rated by children and young people themselves, to ensure that they can demonstrate how they are helping children.

Finally, looked after children and care leavers **should be viewed as experts on the care system**. Local authorities should ensure they have **effective mechanisms for consulting them** about service improvement.

4 See the resilience frameworks developed by Professor Angie Hart and colleagues <http://www.boingboing.org.uk/index.php/resilience-in-practice/what-is-resilient-therapy>

### Priority four: supporting and sustaining children’s relationships

Looked after children and young people are very clear that whether they had a positive or negative experience of care was largely down to their relationships with carers, birth family members, friends and other professionals. The importance of these relationships was also a key finding from the Rees Centre’s literature review which was commissioned by the NSPCC as part of this project.

The local authorities involved in this project identified a number of proposals for how looked after children could be supported to have more secure and stable placements with their caregivers. This included **working to improve the status of foster carers** in the children’s workforce. Foster carers should be provided **with training and support to help them understand and address the emotional needs of looked after children**. Local authorities should **monitor carers’ emotional well-being too and promote early intervention to support stable placements**.

Our work with children and young people highlighted that most looked after children and care leavers **continue to see their families as central to their lives after they enter care**. While these **family relationships may be problematic, they are often life-long and most children in Wales will leave care to return to their birth families**. Local authorities and health services should **recognise the importance of supporting positive relationships between looked after children and their birth families where this is possible and safe** for the child or young person. Further research and service development work is needed to **identify effective ways of supporting the relationships between looked after children and their birth families to promote children’s emotional well-being**.

### Priority five: supporting care leavers’ emotional needs

The local authorities who partnered on this project identified **support for care leavers’ emotional needs as an important priority for system design**. The transitional period when care leavers approach independence and the time immediately after they

leave care can present significant challenges to their emotional well-being.

Discussions with young people and professionals indicate that preparation for leaving care tends to be **focused overwhelmingly on practical concerns** rather than on emotional preparation for leaving care. These practical concerns can significantly impact on young people's emotional well-being (e.g. the stress of insecure housing). However, there are also purely social and emotional dimensions which need to be addressed. Critical to this is the question of 'what will my support network look like after I leave care?'

Local authorities **must ensure that care leavers' emotional well-being is a key theme within pathway planning.** Leaving care services should see emotional preparation for leaving care as one of their key areas of responsibility. They should ensure that other decisions, such as the location of their new accommodation, are made with young people's emotional needs in mind. **Preparation work for young people leaving care should include helping care leavers to develop and maintain relationships with people who will be able to continue supporting them after they leave care.** This work should start as early as possible so when young people leave care they have a set of strong relationships they will be able to rely on for emotional support.

When care leavers turn 18 (or in some cases 16), they become **ineligible for CAMHS** and other support services. These young people are still viewed as a former looked after child by children's social care. However, health services view them as adults whose eligibility for mental health support is no different from anybody else, creating significant gaps in support.

Professionals involved in this project agreed that **emotional and mental health support for care leavers is inadequate** and there needs to be a step change in the support available to them, to help ensure that their transition to independence is successful. Some local areas are already responding to this challenge by embedding a part-time CAMHS worker in their leaving care team, to improve care

leavers' access to therapeutic support and giving social workers' access to clinical support to improve their understanding of care leavers' emotional needs. **This priority access to adult mental health services should be extended to all care leavers, with all local authorities and health agencies putting arrangements in place to ensure care leavers can still access therapeutic support up to the age of 25, with smooth transitions from CAMHS for young people who are already accessing services.**

Interviews with young people during the project also revealed that **some have struggled with feeling under pressure to leave their placement before they were ready**, and had become depressed or anxious under the strain of living on their own. **We welcome the recent Welsh Government guidance aimed at helping local authorities implement the When I am Ready scheme** and hope that this will help young people make a more progressive transition to independent living, thus ensuring greater stability and better outcomes.

## Conclusion

Prioritising and enhancing the emotional well-being of looked after children forms a central part of a focussed debate on a vision for looked after children in Wales. We hope that the priorities for change highlighted by our project will help provide a platform for what this and the next National Assembly for Wales can achieve and deliver better outcomes for looked after children.

It is also worth noting that there is a financial benefit associated with ensuring stable placements for looked after children. Loughborough university carried out cost modelling work for this project in the English context using their Cost Calculator for Children's Services<sup>5</sup> and concluded that a child's unstable and unsupported experience of care cost £22,415 more per year than another child's stable and well-supported care. Similar work could be replicated for Wales subject to funding but the English example provides a useful illustration of cost savings associated with stable placements.

5 <http://www.lboro.ac.uk/research/ccfr/research/exploring/project---the-cost-calculator-for-childrens-services.html>

Find out more about our work at  
[nspcc.org.uk](https://www.nspcc.org.uk)