

# Safely reducing the need for children to enter care



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Find out more about what the Ministerial Advisory Group for Improving Outcomes for Children is doing to safely reduce the need for children to enter care

## **Why do we need to safely reduce the number of children who are looked after in Wales?**

As of March 2018, there were 6,405 looked after children in Wales.

Over the last 15 years the number of looked after children in Wales has increased by 34 per cent.

The Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act emphasises supporting families to stay together, where this is safe and in the best interests of the child.

For children and young people, this means:

- identifying and assessing as early as possible those children who need care and support (including help to achieve emotional well-being and resilience)
- helping them to use the strengths in their families and resources in their communities for support
- ensuring intervention at a stage which prevents needs becoming critical.

Wales has higher rates of children looked after than the other UK nations and there are considerable differences between local authorities.

An [Analysis of the Factors Contributing to the High Rates of Care in Wales](#), a briefing paper by The Wales Centre for Public Policy in July 2019 explained why this is the case, using published data to identify factors which are driving

these trends, including:

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

Other reports about the number of children who are looked after in Wales include [Research on Differences in the looked after children population](#) and [Born into care](#).

## **Why are there so many children who are looked after in Wales?**

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, emphasising:

- 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 [Care Crisis Review](#), published in June 2018, confirmed the sense of crisis that is now felt by many young people, families and those working within the system because of increased use of court proceedings.

## **What do professionals think about the numbers of children who are looked after in**

## **Wales?**

Concerned professionals described the frustration they feel at working in a sector that is overstretched and overwhelmed and in which, too often, children and families do not get the direct help they need early enough to prevent difficulties escalating.

The Care Crisis Review identified unease among practitioners about how lack of resources, poverty and deprivation are making it harder for families and the system to cope.

Many contributors to the Review also expressed a strong sense of concern that a culture of blame, shame and fear has permeated the system, affecting those working in it as well as the children and families reliant on it.

The Review suggests this has led to an environment that's increasingly mistrusting and risk averse and prompts individuals to seek refuge in procedural responses.

We continue to see growing pressure on the family court system in Wales, with high workloads and increasingly tight resources.

However, the Review also found positive examples. Some local authorities are bucking national trends of rising numbers of children who are looked after and are making exciting developments in policy, practice and service development.

Children and families describe individual practitioners who have transformed their situation and some professionals describe innovations, approaches and leaders who enable them to practice in a way that is respectful, humane and rewarding.

The review also found that both the legislation and its principles that underpin social care were sound.

The review also found professionals across Wales want to learn from what is working, and to 'work with' rather than 'do to' families.

Many young people and families work with professionals to improve their own situation and the social care system by putting their unique perspectives and experiences to good use. This in turn helps to dispel fear and anxiety among people using care and support.

## **The role of early intervention in safely reducing the number of children who are looked after in Wales**

Early intervention and prevention programmes like Families First and Flying Start, are a key part of tackling ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences) and building stronger and more resilient families and communities.

We know that good prevention and early intervention can help us to identify problems sooner and stop them getting worse.

Cymru Well Wales supports public services to [reduce the harm caused by ACEs by building resilience in the population to cope with them.](#)

Research shows us there is a strong relationship between rates at which children come into care and deprivation in local areas.

Tackling poverty and building community resilience with services aimed at keeping families together helps to reduce the numbers of children entering care.

In 2019-20, Welsh local authorities will benefit from over £76 million in funding for Flying Start and £38 million for Families First, together with further opportunities for integrating services.

## **The Welsh Government's support for families who are on the 'edge of care'**

The Welsh Government has provided local authorities with £5 million of recurrent funding to support vulnerable families who are on the 'edge of care', where it is safe and appropriate.

'Edge of care' means their children are at risk of being looked after.

Investment at this stage can help reduce the numbers of children in care and free up resources in local authorities to focus on prevention and better support for children who are already in care.

The voluntary sector plays a crucial role in supporting families who are on the 'edge of care', as shown in the report [Reducing the number of children in need of care](#).

Further work is needed to support vulnerable families so children can keep living safely with them and avoid the need for care proceedings.

This includes looking at wider family and friends for support, including as alternative carers for children, either short term, for respite, or as part of a longer-term arrangement.

Integrated 'edge of care' services can help families stay together in times of crisis. For example, over 700 families work with Integrated Family Support Services (IFSS) teams every year.

The MAG has produced a report identifying effective approaches to family support and strategies for managing risk in edge of care, [Reducing the number of children in need of care](#).

The Welsh Government has given additional funding to Regional Partnership Boards to strengthen support for vulnerable families whose children are at risk of entering the care system and to provide additional therapeutic services.

The Regional Partnership Boards have also been given good practice guidance about integrated commissioning services:

[Good Practice Guidance for Regional Partnership Boards on the Integrated Commissioning of Services for Families, Children and Young People with complex needs](#)

The Welsh Government has also:

- funded additional capacity in local authorities for family conferences and reunification
- set-up a technical group to help local authorities set plans and targets for reducing the numbers of children who experience care
- rolled out the Reflect project across Wales to reduce the number of children taken into care by breaking the cycle of repeat pregnancies and recurrent care proceedings.

The Ministerial Advisory Group is also helping to develop and consult on a national framework for special guardianship support services, including common eligibility criteria for financial and other support.