



Briefing: Hope instead of Handcuffs



Too many children are being handcuffed.

Children and young people living in or on the edge of care often need to be transported between care settings, taken to school, hospital or court hearings. Local authorities regularly hire private secure transportation providers to carry out these journeys.

Shockingly, many children find that they are automatically put in handcuffs by their transportation provider. A child does not need to be considered “high risk” to be put in handcuffs: a child who displays even the slightest sign of distress risks being subject to handcuffs or other forms of restraint.

To be clear, we are referring to innocent children in the UK’s care system being handcuffed by private organisations whilst being securely transported. Not children who have been involved or are suspected of being involved in criminal activity being handcuffed by police.

We know that there is a deeply worrying prevalence of providers handcuffing or restraining children, with some organisations advertising that they use handcuffs on their website. We can tell if a child has been handcuffed from the red marks left on the skin of their wrists.

Stakeholders in this sector, including Ofsted, the Office of the Children’s Commissioner and even the Department for Education are aware of private secure transportation providers using handcuffs on the children in their care, as well as of the lack of data collected on how often handcuffs are used.

Data gaps put vulnerable children at risk.

Worryingly, Secure transportation providers across the UK are not required to report any instances of handcuffing or restraint to the appropriate authority. The practice remains unregulated and unmonitored, and this data gap puts vulnerable children at risk. This contrasts with children’s homes, where Ofsted has the power to inspect the restraint practices of care home providers.

Without an official regulatory or policy mechanism to report and monitor the use of handcuffs, there is no way to check why handcuffs are being used on these innocent children. Without this data, we cannot ensure that any restraint during secure transportation is only used as a last resort after all other, less harmful approaches have been exhausted.

Only by plugging this worrying data gap can we enable proper review and monitoring, as well as increase transparency and accountability amongst providers.

Ensuring that all incidents of child restraint are recorded, monitored and evaluated by the state is a key recommendation of the United Nations (UN) Committee on the Rights of the Child. According to the Committee, children should never be restrained to secure compliance. Restraint should only ever be used if the child poses an imminent danger to themselves or others, under the direct supervision of a medical professional and only after all other measures have been exhausted.

In December 2021, the House of Commons Health and Social Care Select Committee made a similar recommendation in its [report](#) into children and young people’s mental health. The Select Committee noted that “the use of restraint while a young person is in transit is a cause for concern” and that the absence of any legal obligation on providers to report instances of restraint “is at odds with the requirement on children’s homes to report incidents of restraint, allowing a data gap to emerge”.

Echoing the objectives of our campaign, the Select Committee recommends that “all organisations involved in the transportation of children should be required to report such incidents so that these can be monitored and acted upon where necessary”.

The government recently introduced landmark regulations and published guidance to better protect patients in mental health settings over the inappropriate use of force. The [Mental Health Units \(Use of Force\) Act](#), better known as Seni’s Law, will ensure better accountability and shows that a regulatory mechanism exists – we just need the government to also apply it to private secure transportation providers.

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Our report

We developed a [report](#) that explores the issues caused by the use of physical restraint on care-experienced children. It also investigates the importance of providing the emotional support and mentoring these vulnerable young people need to reach their full potential, and the long-term financial implications for local authorities and the government from failing to properly support these vulnerable children.

Our campaign objectives

Handcuffs and other methods of restraint are extremely damaging to children – both physically and mentally. All children should be treated with kindness, respect and offered support so that they can reach their potential and lead safe, fulfilling lives.

That is why we launched our campaign – Hope instead of Handcuffs – which we would like you to be a part of. Our core campaign objectives are for the government to:

1. Mandate that all private secure transportation providers be legally obliged to report any instances of restraint, including handcuffing, of innocent children to an appropriate body
2. Appoint an appropriate body to collect, monitor and review data provided by these private secure transport providers to increase transparency and accountability
3. Ultimately, end the handcuffing of innocent children by private secure transportation providers and ensure that restraint is only ever used when there is a considerable risk of the child harming themselves or others
4. Recognise that a new, child-centred approach is needed that treats vulnerable children as victims instead of criminals, and ensures that secure transportation providers in the UK's care system do not contribute to further trauma

Case study: Wales

The [Reducing Restrictive Practices Framework](#) (RRPF) - published in July 2021 - sets out the Welsh Government's expectations for policy and practice in reducing restrictive practices across childcare, education, health and social care settings. It notes that data on the use of restrictive practices should be reviewed and analysed regularly to monitor trends and inform reduction strategies. The Framework should apply to all commissioned services but reference to secure transportation was notably absent.

The Framework also sets out how Care Inspectorate Wales will consider compliance with the Framework when carrying out inspections. However, we know that currently, there has been no proper mechanism in place to enable Care Inspectorate Wales to inspect the restraint practices of secure transportation providers during their inspection of local authorities.

Over the last six months, we have worked closely with the Welsh Government to address these omissions and secure important amendments to the RRPF. Officials recently confirmed to us that the Framework will be updated in three areas:

1. Local authorities must apply the provisions of the Framework to any secure transportation services they commission. This includes exercising due diligence to the restraint policies of secure transportation providers, which will be a condition of procurement.
2. Secure transportation providers will need to report any instances of restraint that take place in their journeys to the commissioning local authority. Local authorities will be asked to monitor such instances of restraint as part of the wider monitoring of restrictive practices.
3. Care Inspectorate Wales will monitor adherence to the principles of the Framework as part of their inspections of local authorities.

These small but significant changes will help vulnerable children by encouraging local authorities to pay due diligence to the restraint practices of secure transportation providers when commissioning their services and will ensure that providers no longer operate without proper monitoring or scrutiny. In England and Scotland, there is scope for a similar framework for local authorities to be developed and we will continue to campaign for this to happen.

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About Serenity Welfare

Serenity Welfare works with local authorities, children's charities, schools, alternative education providers, youth offending services and healthcare professionals across the UK to offer secure transportation and welfare services for vulnerable children and young adults in care, 24-hours-a-day, seven days per week.

If a child living in or on the edge of care needs to be transported between care homes or other secure settings, or taken to school, hospital or other appointments, we are on hand to provide safe, comfortable, secure and compassionate transportation. We transport children aged between 10 and 17 years old across the UK, completing upwards of 200 journeys a year on average. We have a 100% success rate in 'stress free', compassionate and therapeutic journeys and have never used handcuffs.

We also offer 24/7 wrap around care, crisis intervention services, talks and presentations on gangs and county lines, and high-quality mentoring services so that vulnerable children receive the positive and consistent nurturing they need.

De-escalation and mentoring should be the preferred approach.

Having seen children as young as 11-years-old with red marks on their wrists from being handcuffed by other transport providers, our Founder Emily Aklan felt compelled to launch the Hope instead of Handcuffs campaign to end this brutal practice.

Serenity Welfare never uses handcuffs on the children in our care and we have a 100% success rate in avoiding this. Our focus is always on non-violent de-escalation and mentoring as part of a humanistic and compassionate provision of care. We are licensed to use Maybo, an internationally renowned technique that allows us to understand a child's psychological requirements to safely de-escalate emotionally charged situations. Our staff are also highly skilled in coaching and mentoring, so that if there is an incident of conflict or stress, they can diffuse the situation effectively, without the need for force. We advocate a move away from the use of restraint in the care system towards de-escalation, which is a more effective method that avoids damaging a child's physical and mental wellbeing.

Too often, vulnerable and at-risk children are treated as criminals rather than victims who require consistent, timely, high-quality interventions to rebuild their lives. Positive behaviour support and other alternatives to de-escalate challenging behaviour should always be the preferred approach.

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