



Nick Ramsay AM
Chair
Public Accounts Committee
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
CF99 1NA

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Dear Nick Ramsay AM

Thank you for your letter requesting our views to help inform the Public Accounts Committee long-term inquiry into the issues impacting on Care Experienced Children and Young People in Wales. We were delighted to provide written evidence to inform the initial phase of your inquiry and to support the young people who met with Committee members with our member organisation Voices from Care Cymru in 2017.

We welcome the First Minister's continued commitment to safely reduce the number of children who come into the care system, and to prioritise the principle of prevention as resources over time are more effectively redistributed towards supporting children to stay with their families, where it is safe to do so. Whilst safety is of paramount importance, it is also a children's rights issue as many care experienced children and young people lose contact with their siblings and wider family as well as losing friendships through moving school and this causes them extra emotional stress.

In our submission to the Committee, we called for there to be a greater emphasis on early intervention and prevention services for children and parents in need of support to help prevent escalation of need and recourse to more costly acute services, including the initiation of care proceedings. Further work is required to ensure that preventative and edge of care services are routinely accessible for all families who could benefit from additional support, and that commissioning arrangements ensure that third sector organisations in particular receive the appropriate level of funds to deliver quality services which meet expectations and demand. We are aware that such arrangements have been successful in other areas of the

UK such as North West, Glasgow City where the Health and Social Care Partnership have focussed on commissioning such services and have invested heavily in third sector services.

There is also the issue of what happens to children whilst they are in the care system to enable them to return home if at all possible. There needs to be sufficient resources to ensure that whilst in care, the child and their family receives sufficient professional help. Trauma is part of their experience and so trauma informed practice by all professionals involved is essential and this involves a sufficiently trained workforce to make the best use of the time that the child is in care. Children and young people are good judges of the care experience and should be involved. Many care leavers return to their birth family on leaving care which indicates an area for more focus.

We note that the Welsh Government has called on all local authorities in Wales to develop 'bespoke reduction expectation plans' to manage the reduction in the number of children in their care. With the number of children in care expected to rise again when the latest set of annual statistics are released later this month – anticipated to be around 7,000 children - there is a consensus of opinion that the upward trend and pressure on existing services and finances is unsustainable. Doing nothing is not an option for these reasons, as well as the perpetual unease concerning the poorer outcomes for care experienced children when compared to some of their peers.

It is within this context that we support in principle the Welsh Government approach and expectations, alongside their commitment to work in partnership with local authorities, ADSS, the Third Sector and the WLGA to develop and deliver ambitious yet realistic and achievable bespoke plans with reduction targets. Such plans must be developed by placing the rights of the child firmly at the centre, and we would expect local authorities to ensure there are effective and appropriate ways of engaging care experienced children within their area as their plans are being developed. Children and young people have considerable knowledge about what constitutes a good experience in care and also what might have been helpful to prevent them being removed from the families in the first place.

We would like to stress that the issue has to be addressed as that of a 'whole system' which includes the courts, the judiciary, Cafcass Cymru, Local Health Boards etc. as well as local government and third sector. As well as there being an overall increase in numbers, regional variation may be due to specific practices in local areas, not only of the social services departments but also of the courts. Careful analysis of local patterns is welcomed. Safely reducing the number of children in care has to be a shared responsibility. All strategic partners as part of their local corporate parenting responsibilities, should ensure that they actively contribute to identifying and financing solutions; deliver interventions and monitoring the impact of their actions which contribute to reduction expectation.

We would welcome the Welsh Government providing national leadership in supporting local authorities to share practice by arranging learning exchange events, and Children in Wales was pleased to be represented at the workshop held last month. As well as performance monitoring arrangements with each individual local authority, collective reporting should be delivered through the Ministerial Advisory Group on Outcomes for Children (MAG) with regular updates provided to Assembly Members and your Committee as progress is achieved, alongside annual scrutiny in Plenary.

Performance measures should not solely be numerical and should be nationally set. We do not wish to be in a situation where a local authority's predetermined target becomes the driver for determining whether or not care proceedings are initiated. If it is determined that an individual child is at risk and it is in their best interest for them to be placed in care for their safety and protection, then this should govern the course of action which follows, never any target. The statutory duty on local authorities to keep children safe must eclipse any other considerations.

We do hope that this information proves helpful in informing your deliberations, as we continue to strive to achieve the best possible outcomes for all care experienced children and young people in Wales.

Yours Sincerely

Children in Wales