

# Children on the margins

## Findings of stakeholder events

September 2024

During summer 2024 we held 2 stakeholder events to hear from front-line professionals, academics and policy experts about issues relevant to missing children, criminally exploited children, and other groups of children on the margins. This report sets out the key findings of those discussions.

The stakeholder events were:

- On 15 May 2024, focussing on missing children
- On 19 June 2024, focussing on criminalised children

Both events were hybrid (i.e. with both in-person and virtual participation). A full list of attendees is set out at annex A.

The views set out in this report are those of the stakeholders with whom we spoke. They are unattributed to protect the anonymity of the attendees. They do not necessarily represent the views of the Children, Young People and Education Committee. This report conveys the key points of the discussions that took place over the course of our stakeholder events; it is not a verbatim record of that discussion.



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# 1. Groups of children on the margins

## Children who go missing

### Nature and scale

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1. Stakeholders specifically highlighted the following groups of children as at-risk of going missing:
  - Care experienced children (particularly those who were in out-of-area placements, including in England). Some stakeholders told us that some children in out-of-area placements are going missing to return home, or to spend time with their friends. Others explained that children in care can experience placement issues, which they run away from.
  - Children known to social services, including those who have experienced childhood trauma.
  - Children who are experiencing family breakdown.
  - Children who are not in an education setting, or are attending on reduced timetables.
  - Children presenting with behavioural issues.
  - Neurodiverse children and children with additional learning needs.
2. There was general agreement that the age range of children going missing is getting younger. One stakeholder suggested that children aged 12-14 were most at risk. Others indicated that they are seeing more girls going missing than before.
3. There was a general consensus that children who go missing tend to do so more than once.

### Policy and practice

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## **Data**

- 4.** Stakeholders consistently told us that there is a lack of reliable data about missing children.<sup>1</sup> This is because there is no reporting template, and because different local authorities define and respond to missing episodes differently.
- 5.** A key message from stakeholders was that children in care are over-represented in data about missing episodes. Although they undoubtedly make up a significant proportion of children who go missing, the response when a looked after child is reported missing tends to be much more immediate and formal compared to children who go missing from their family. For example, a looked after child might be reported as missing if they are few hours late home from their curfew. Reporting can be particularly strict in residential care and when agency staff are on duty. On the other hand, a child's family might not report the child as missing unless they are missing for at least 24 hours.
- 6.** Stakeholders stressed to us that over-reporting of missing episodes involving children in care is not a problem in and of itself. However, policy makers should not focus all of their attention on the particular circumstances of children in care, because the pool of children going missing is actually much wider.
- 7.** We heard that the definition of a missing episode should be flexible enough to account for different children's circumstances and the different risks they face. It wouldn't necessarily be helpful to have one fixed definition of a missing child.
- 8.** We also heard that, even if some local authorities collect data about missing episodes, they do not always share it.
- 9.** Stakeholders advocated a consistent, national approach to data collection to understand better the nature and scale of missing episodes across Wales.

## **Responding to a missing episode**

- 10.** We heard that, when a child goes missing, there is a duty to inform the relevant local authority, health board and the local police force. However, this duty is not being discharged consistently. This is hampering the adequacy of the multi-agency response to specific incidents.
- 11.** However, others disagreed, and felt that multi-agency reactive practice is relatively slick and works well. For example, one stakeholder told us that

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<sup>1</sup> Although the Welsh Government now publishes statistics on children who go missing from care. See: StatsWales, '[Children who go missing from care during the year, by local authority](#)'

following a missing episode, there are usually regular multi-agency meetings about the child.

**12.** Stakeholders explained to us that different local authorities have different policies about how and when to intervene with children who go missing. One stakeholder explained that care homes have children from different local authorities, and are therefore well-placed to identify divergences in practice from one local authority to another. The stakeholder told us that care homes report that local authorities respond differently to missing episodes, and, depending on the local authority, children's home staff are not consistently involved in important meetings about at risk children at their home. This is difficult to understand given they are the child's primary care givers.

**13.** Some stakeholders told us that keeping track of children who go missing can be difficult. It is not appropriate to record a child on the Child Protection Register if they have had a number of missing episodes unless they have faced a significant risk of harm during the missing episode itself. And there are no other systems in place to keep track of children who regularly go missing, unlike for children involved in Child Sexual Exploitation.

**14.** One stakeholder spoke positively about South Wales Police's policy of developing a register of high risk missing persons. They told us that the police force goes out and meet people on that register regularly, which can prevent further harm.

**15.** However, another raised concern about adding extra layers and systems to the response to missing episodes. They stressed that we should be making the administrative systems as lean as possible, giving more time to social workers and other workers to build relationships with children and their families.

### **Return interviews**

**16.** We heard that return interviews are an important way to discuss the missing episode with the child, both to identify any concerns that led to the child going missing and also to establish what happened during the missing episode itself.

**17.** Stakeholders agreed that return interviews should always be offered to a child following a missing episode. This is a statutory requirement in England. The child should choose who conducts the interview, and the child should have the right to refuse an interview if they don't want one. No interview should go ahead without the child's consent.

**18.** However, we also heard that the approach to return interviews across Wales is highly variable. Some attendees told us that children in care tend to be offered a return interview more consistently than children who are not in a care setting. Many children are not offered a return interview at all.

**19.** We also heard that different regions have different approaches to return interviews. The interviews in some regions are good, others are bad, and in some they don't tend to happen at all.

**20.** Stakeholders explained to us that in 3 regions the Police and Crime Commissioner commissions the return interviews from independent providers (Llamau or NYAS). But in some regions the interviews are done in-house. Some stakeholders suggested that it was important that children have the opportunity to talk to independent professionals, rather than people linked with statutory services.

**21.** We heard that once a return interview has been conducted, the information from the interview should be shared with relevant partners. The interviews should be conducted properly, with recorded outputs for follow ups. They shouldn't be a tick box exercise. Some stakeholders felt that one important output of return interviews should be that the child is signposted to other support services, e.g. independent advocacy.

### **Multi-agency working**

**22.** We regularly heard from stakeholders that multi-agency working is critical when responding to missing episodes.

**23.** However, multi-agency working isn't done consistently well across the country. There should be collaboration at local, regional and national level. At the moment, some local authorities work collaboratively, whereas others don't.

**24.** We heard about some areas where there are regular multi-agency strategy meetings for missing children (e.g. exploitation panels, which happen monthly in some areas).

**25.** Other stakeholders told us that agencies (such as local authorities and police forces) do not communicate with one another in the preventative space about at-risk children. Some attendees agreed that sometimes a lack of communication between agencies means that children and families can be inundated with too many professionals at the same time.

**26.** There was general agreement that the agencies that work to support children going missing should be co-located, whether virtually or physically.

We heard the following proposals for change:

- The definition of a missing episode should be flexible enough to account for different children's circumstances and the different risks they face.
- The offer of a return interview should be a statutory requirement for every missing episode. The child should be able to decide who carries out the return interview, and the output of the return interview should include actions and should be followed up.
- National practice standards should set out clearly the Welsh Government's expectations about responding to missing episodes, to ensure a consistent response across local authorities and partner agencies.
- Reliable, standardised and validated data about missing episodes should be collected and published by the Welsh Government to understand the scale and nature of missing episodes, drawing on the national practice standards to ensure data reliability.
- Develop a register of high-risk missing persons, as a way to record concern about vulnerable children and trigger further support.
- There should be better communication between local authorities, schools, the police and partner agencies to share information and encourage preventative interventions.

## **Criminally exploited children**

### **Nature and scale**

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#### **Defining Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE)**

**27.** Numerous professionals raised concern that there is no statutory definition of child criminal exploitation. It can take many different forms, including 'county lines', and exploiters will change their exploitative models to respond to changes in policing. This can involve trafficking children across Wales, and even across borders. For example, one stakeholder told us about one young person who had been tagged, whom they followed. The child was taken out to sea, docked in Liverpool, then was tracked back to north Wales.

## **Children at particular risk of criminalisation**

**28.** We heard that children who are particularly at risk of being criminalised include:

- Children who go missing. Missing episodes are an early indicator of risk of further harm.
- Children who do not have a safe home life. Sometimes these children can feel safer in gangs than they do at home, where there might be lots of trauma, or out on the streets without protection from their gang. One stakeholder told us that they hear from boys that they would rather be caught by the police with a knife than be caught by another gang without one.
- Children who are not in education or are on reduced timetables. We heard that here is regional variation in which groups of children are targeted by exploiters. For example, some students in FE colleges in West Wales have been targeted, which is not where you might expect people to be involved in criminal exploitation.
- Children who have some additional support needs, but who have not been formally identified as having ALN.
- Boys are more at risk of being criminalised than girls. However, some stakeholders told us that girls are often overlooked. For example, girls in relationships with criminalised boys can themselves get pulled into criminal activity.
- Children being brought up in poverty are more vulnerable to the potential financial rewards of getting involved in criminal activities.

**29.** Some stakeholders agreed that younger children are becoming vulnerable to criminalisation. Before, 14 was the youngest they would see involved in criminal activity. Now, children as young as 11 who are being targeted.

**30.** We also heard that traditional views of which groups of children are susceptible to criminalisation are now out of date. Previously, almost all children were in care. Currently, 60-70% are from the family home. Some are affluent children.

**31.** Some stakeholders explained to us that some children face peer pressure to be part of gangs. These children often struggle with making connections, and

are therefore more susceptible to gang life. Other stakeholders told us that earning money is often a key motivation for children who get involved in criminal activity.

### **The changing nature of criminal exploitation**

**32.** There was a general consensus that criminalisation is a bigger problem now than it has ever been.

**33.** We heard from different stakeholders that criminal gangs are more sophisticated than ever before. They know where they vulnerable children are, and they are successful at recruiting: some biggest employers in some areas are criminal gangs.

**34.** Some stakeholders spoke about the high number of criminalisation episodes in Powys according to Welsh Government statistics. They felt that this reflected a better response to criminalisation, including better training and multi-agency working to identify children at an earlier stage.

**35.** Stakeholders generally agreed that exploiters are moving away from care homes and are targeting children in schools, and getting children to identify other vulnerable children via school networks.

**36.** Some stakeholders told us that exploitation by family members is also increasing. For example, this might happen when a parent is involved in drug dealing, then using the child as a runner.

**37.** One stakeholder explained that the risks to the young person once they become involved in criminal activity are high. They could be arrested with drugs, weapons, or cash. Those assets are seized by the police, rightly, leaving the child with a debt to the gang. That child gets indebted to the exploiter, in a process known as debt bondage. One stakeholder told us that sometimes exploiters will even arrange for their own runners to be robbed, to create a debt that bonds the child to their gang.

**38.** Others told us that, sometimes, as more senior gang members get imprisoned, children will step up to become perpetrators themselves. One stakeholder explained that the police used to call these children “alpha victims”.

*“There isn't always a Fagin right at the top.”*

**39.** We heard that criminal gangs are now more resistant to agency involvement. Exploiters now have more money, and they have a reputation to uphold. They do not necessarily go away with agency involvement.

## **Policy and practice**

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### **Responding to CCE**

**40.** We heard from different stakeholders that, because CCE has not been well-defined, professionals often don't understand what it means and what the signs of it are. Some stakeholders felt that the All Wales Practice Guidance sets out a very traditional response, and it needs updating.

**41.** Many stakeholders advocated the development of a national strategy for reducing the criminalisation of children.

**42.** One stakeholder told us that Cardiff has adopted the Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) model for CCE. This has been successful. However, we did not hear positive views of the approaches taken by statutory services in other areas. One professional told us that in North Wales there is a narrative that problems are caused by Liverpool gangs, not local children. This isn't true, and reflects an unwillingness to acknowledge the problems.

**43.** We heard regularly that there aren't enough support services to provide long-term support to criminalised children. One stakeholder told us that where individuals are identified by the police as having a threat to life, they might be relocated. The child is moved to another local authority, where they are likely to qualify for emergency accommodation. But once they have been moved they aren't adequately supported. Social media may alert the child's exploiters to the child's new location. The exploiters are able to contact them, the pattern returns, and the child falls into the same exploitative relationship again.

### **The role of the charity sector**

**44.** We heard from some that the charity sector is leading the way in supporting children vulnerable to CCE because it was their belief that statutory services do not have an obligation to do so. We regularly heard that youth workers in particular have the skills to deal with groups of marginalised young people, and that the workers should be physically out there on the streets, supporting young people face-to-face.

**45.** However, others pointed out that many support services do not provide long-term support for children, and that it can take up to 6 months to make sure a child feels comfortable with an adult. Others suggested that some staff working for charity sector projects may not always have enough experience working in such high-risk settings. One project manager told us that they try to appoint project workers with lived experience of similar issues, which can help break down barriers with the young people.

**46.** One stakeholder told us that children caught up in criminal activity often don't trust professionals. Many children have been let down a lot, and that feeling isn't only common amongst children who have been in care.

**47.** We heard regularly that the charity sector is often able to build more positive relationships with vulnerable children. Some stakeholders suggested that the police sometimes view children as criminals, whereas a child-centred response would be to view them as victims of exploitation. Sometimes, children don't even know that they are being exploited. However, some attendees also acknowledged that there can be a fine line between children being victims, and being perpetrators themselves.

**48.** We also heard from different professionals that it is important to work with the whole family, and even the wider community, to make it clear that criminal activity is not a normal pathway. We heard that many parents have children who are involved in criminal activity didn't even know that their children are at risk.

### **Multi-agency working**

**49.** We heard from some stakeholders that information sharing isn't as much of an issue as it used to be, although it remained an ongoing challenge. They told us their views that the police in particular have become more collaborative. However, they told us that working alongside health, housing and education colleagues can be very difficult.

**50.** We heard some positive feedback about Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) and Youth Justice Services, which can be invaluable contacts to build relationships with young people, and are effective at referring children on to specialist support services where required.

**51.** However, some stakeholders felt that the police work in a child-centred way until they turn 18, at which point they are responded to in a much more punitive way.

*"It's almost like they've got a target on their back, and as soon as they mess up [when they're 18] they get locked up."*

**52.** They argued that children's service should go up to 21. We heard that children approaching 18 who are at risk of being criminalised are incredibly vulnerable due to their life experiences and trauma.

*"Life skills are at the bottom of their list of priorities."*

**53.** Stakeholders generally agreed that there is some good multi-agency working going on, but collaborative working is not as effective as it should be. Some told us that both the regional and national safeguarding boards don't seem to be meeting as often as they should, and that there is anecdotal evidence that they are resisting taking ownership of CCE.

**54.** Others told us that important multi-agency meetings take place – such as high risk panels – key people aren't invited, such as the child's social workers, or even the child's family. Describing who attended, they said:

*"It's everyone who's never met the child."*

**55.** We heard that, ultimately, an important outcome of multi-agency work should be the need to provide a route for vulnerable young people to find work and earn money legally and safely.

### **The UK Government response**

**56.** One stakeholder explained that areas are considered either primarily 'import' or 'export' areas for county lines activity. Wales is seen as an import area. We were told that Home Office money is primarily given to export areas, which means that there is patchy financial support to address CCE in Wales. We were also told that the issue is more complex than what this funding model suggests, and there is overlap between import/export and cross over between criminal vs sexual exploitation.

**57.** Some stakeholders agreed that the UK Government does not understand the extent of the issue. Others felt that the UK Government funds interventions in England, but leaves support in Wales to the charity sector.

### **The National Referral Mechanism (NRM)**

**58.** NRM referrals are made to the UK Home Office to raise concern about children (and adults) who are potentially victims of modern slavery. Referrals are

made by so called 'first responder' organisations, which include local authorities, police forces and some third sector organisations. The purpose of the referral is to ensure that the individual at risk at those supporting them are provided with appropriate support.

**59.** We heard from some stakeholders that NRM decisions can take up to 2.5 years, although it is often much faster than that. We heard that NRM can be a good mechanism for helping young people not to be criminalised, but there was also a view that it can also help exploiters. Exploiters know that it happens, and will often tell children who are involved in criminal activity to say they're being exploited, knowing that may trigger an NRM referral, which could mean that the child won't be prosecuted.

**60.** Another stakeholder told us that children may be issued with an NRM, but that no action is taken, and they subsequently return to their previous situation and return to exploitation.

We heard the following proposals for change:

- Create a national strategy/action plan for Children Criminal Exploitation, similar to what is already in place for Child Sexual Exploitation.
- Create a standard set of training for all practitioners working with children and young people to underpin the proposed national strategy, and fund for it to be rolled out to everyone working with criminalised children.
- Improve data collection, validation and transparency about CCE.
- Establish dedicated exploitation teams within social services.
- Disrupt the 'predators', rather than move the exploited children.
- Establish Multi Agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASH) across Wales – and make them physical hubs for supporting and working with young people and their families.
- Ensure both local and national safeguarding boards to meet regularly, publish their minutes and attendance, and take ownership of CCE.
- Stop schools excluding children and placing them on reduced timetables.

## Other groups of marginalised children

### Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE)

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**61.** Different stakeholders told us that children who go missing are at risk of being caught up in CSE. They explained that the lines between criminal exploitation and sexual exploitation are more blurred than before, and that it isn't always the case that it's boys who are criminally exploited and girls who are sexually exploited.

**62.** We heard from some stakeholders about how sexual exploitation can take place online, via a mobile device. This can mean it is more difficult for services to intervene and protect children at risk.

## Responding to marginalised children: common themes

### Preventative services

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**63.** There was widespread support for more preventative services, such as youth workers. One stakeholder described reviewing difficult cases to us as like "looking at a car crash in slow motion". They told us that the risk factors are clear to see, but that without early intervention the inevitable happens.

**64.** A few stakeholders explained to us that at the early stages, some children may not quite meet the thresholds for any statutory services to intervene. They don't receive social services' involvement at that stage, and they haven't met the criminal justice standard either, so they are not receiving any support. But this does not mean that they are not being groomed by criminal gangs.

**65.** Some stakeholders agreed that the idea of having fixed thresholds for interventions should not always be the basis for taking action. It is more important to intervene early and carry out targeted interventions. One stakeholder stressed that community partnership teams need to pick up on anti-social behaviour, and use that to develop links within the community. This should tip the focus away from reactive work towards early intervention and preventative work.

**66.** Some stakeholders felt that there aren't enough services for teenagers. They argued that there is too much focus on early intervention: many services work with young children, and there can be an attitude that it's too late once children are being exploited.

**67.** Some stakeholders agreed that the charity sector was providing essential preventative support that statutory services are not able to provide, and if that support were withdrawn social services would collapse under the pressure.

### Support for parents

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**68.** We heard that families can be afraid to engage with statutory services (such as to report their child as missing, or that they are involved in criminal activity) because they are afraid that the child will be taken into care.

**69.** One charity worker told us that one of the reasons for this lack of trust is that children's services staff do not always react appropriately – they can be judgemental, or can be scrutinised and blamed or accused of neglect. Consequently, they recommend parents begin by contacting the charity sector if they are worried.

**70.** We heard from different groups of stakeholders that there is a gap for parents who need support and advice, but do not meet the threshold for the involvement of statutory services.

**71.** Some stakeholders suggested that there should be more investment in parent advocacy to give a voice to parents who have social services involvement.

### Social services

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**72.** Stakeholders told us that social services don't tend to have the capacity to support older teenagers. Social workers' time is focussed on younger children. Consequently, older teenagers can get written off. Then when they reach 18 they face a cliff edge of support.

*"The most vulnerable get the worst deal."*

**73.** We heard different views about how social services should respond to and support marginalised children and their families. Some stakeholders felt that there should be specialised teams of social workers to work with the most vulnerable and high-risk children and their families. Others felt that social workers should focus on their statutory duties, and charity project workers or others should lead on relationship-focused work.

**74.** However, there was a strong consensus that the most experienced and knowledgeable staff should be working with the most vulnerable and marginalised children.

**75.** We heard regular concerns about pressures facing the social care workforce. One stakeholder told us that there are too many agency workers, and their view that as soon as things get challenging the agency social worker will leave, and somebody else will have to ‘pick up the pieces’. Others told us that the high turnaround of social care staff made it very difficult to provide continuity for children.

**76.** Others advocated for social workers to be assigned to families, rather than to specific young people. They explained that if the young person goes missing, the family will often be left without support.

## **The police**

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Some professionals argued for a return to dedicated child protection police officers. They explained that when police officers rotate, the knowledge and expertise they have gained goes with them.

Others felt that the police will take a short-term response to responding to marginalised children. For example, they may move them out of the immediate area, but do not address the underlying trauma that has caused the child’s behaviour.

## **Workforce issues**

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**77.** Some stakeholders raised concern about workforce challenges facing organisations working with marginalised children:

- There are difficulties recruiting people in certain roles.
- Workloads for social workers are too high, and the stigmatisation of social care is causing recruitment and retention problems.
- High turnover of staff: it is a challenging environment to work in, with some really difficult cases to deal with.
- Staff are not celebrated for work they do.
- Pay for staff working with marginalised children is too low, particularly for youth workers and charity workers. One stakeholder told us that you can earn more in a supermarket than working with vulnerable children.

**78.** We heard that staff working with criminalised children face some very real risks. Some stakeholders told us that they know of staff who have been followed

by exploiters. Others said that support workers carry out a lot of lone working, and will often have a lot of intel about the gangs that the young people is involved in. This places them at risk.

## Funding

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**79.** Numerous stakeholders raised concern about funding, shortages of which can affect service continuity, which in turns affects staff retention. We heard that consistency is really important for when it comes to working with marginalised children.

**80.** Other stakeholders explained that they have funding for a project, but that they do not have capacity to deal with all the referrals they receive once the project has been established.

**81.** Some professionals lamented the lack of physical spaces for them to work with vulnerable children. We heard that there used to be around 25 youth centres in Cardiff, but now there are only around 5. The children who used to be protected by those youth clubs are now vulnerable. One professional felt that there wasn't the level of youth crime when more youth clubs were open:

*"We were being asked to prove the value of our youth work, and we couldn't. But we know when it's gone."*

**82.** Other stakeholders told us that they don't have money to do activities with children, or even to help children eat well and look after themselves.

## Contextual safeguarding

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**83.** One stakeholder advocated moving away from individual child assessments and towards contextual multi-agency assessments, which would identify areas and communities that are at risk and how that risk can be addressed in a holistic way. However, another stakeholder expressed concern that contextual safeguarding can create workload and make it harder for social workers and other practitioners to develop relationships with the child and their family.

We heard the following proposals for change:

- Invest in community support groups and youth work to support families and prevent escalation.

- Provide consistent funding for organisations working with vulnerable children, to embed services and carry out effective relationship building with children and their families.

## 2. Children vulnerable to marginalisation

### Care experienced children

**84.** We heard that there is a significant shortage of high quality foster and residential care placements for children looked after. This leads some children to gravitate back to their family home, putting them at risk of further abuse or trauma. One stakeholder told us that a shortage of high quality placements for children in care meant that some children were being placed in Air BnBs, and some of the most vulnerable of these children are being placed there with staff to support them rather than in appropriate accommodation.

**85.** One stakeholder told us that we are not meeting the needs of children in the care system early enough. As a result, they are being deprived of their liberty or are vulnerable to exploitation.

**86.** Others spoke about challenges providing support to children in care who are moved between local authorities. Certain projects are area-dependent, and may not be able to reach the child in their new area.

**87.** One stakeholder explained that care leavers are particularly vulnerable, despite having statutory services' involvement after the age of 18. Once they turn 18 they are removed from secure units, and the support for them at that point is lacking. We also heard some concern about the basic income pilot, and young people who might be in a vulnerable position because of the money they are regularly receiving from the Welsh Government. They felt that not enough work had been done to identify and support the most vulnerable care leavers who are entitled to regular payments under the pilot.

**88.** Some stakeholders told us that more organisations should be encouraged to adopt the Corporate Parenting Charter to encourage a more robust support response to children in the care system.

### Children not in an education setting

**89.** We heard time and time again that school attendance, and being on the school roll, is a crucial protective factor for vulnerable young people.

**90.** Different frontline professionals told us that *none* of the vulnerable children they work with regularly attend school. We heard that home tuition, which should be provided to many children who don't regularly attend school, isn't

always provided, and that sometimes schools don't understand the risks of excluding pupils. Some stakeholders told us that there are much more children not in education than people think. Excluded children might not be known to statutory services, for example, like children in care would be. This makes them particularly vulnerable to marginalisation.

**91.** We heard from one professional that education services are letting children down, and that even specialist provision doesn't manage children's behaviour effectively, and children end up being excluded – putting them at risk of marginalisation. Others agreed, and suggested that this was due to a lack of training and awareness.

**92.** One stakeholder even argued that the involvement of school staff can make problems worse. E.g., they suggested that if a school claims that a child is involved in drug dealing, the child can be 'thrown out of school', which can lead to family breakdown.

**93.** We heard from some that the transition from primary to secondary school and year 11 are key focus points for vulnerable children, but that schools don't have the capacity/skills to deliver the specialist support needed to help those children. We heard calls for skilled mentors to be based in schools to provide that support.

**94.** Some stakeholders suggested that the Welsh Government should adopt zero exclusion policies for schools to ensure that all children benefit from a protective school environment. Some attendees spoke positively about Southwark Council's zero exclusion policy, and suggested that having something like that in Wales would set a different tone for both pupils and teachers.

## **Children suffering from poor mental health**

**95.** One stakeholder told us about long waiting lists for support for children who have been subject to gang-related violence. They told us that there is medical support immediately available, but mental recovery can take longer and there are no services to support that recovery.

**96.** We heard from some attendees that many of the children they work with suffer from PTSD, and become hypervigilant due to the trauma they have experienced. Others told us that there is very little support for children who have got involved in drug use, or who have been exploited by gangs. They need mental health support using a non-clinical style of approach. It's important to have voluntary engagement to avoid a blame culture, which is not effective.

**97.** Some stakeholders argued for outreach services in STD clinics etc to reach girls. People turn up at health services when not attending anything else. Health professionals can be seen as trusted professionals and can increase gender representation.

## **Neuro-diverse children and children with additional learning needs**

**98.** A number of the professionals we spoke to raised concern that children with additional learning needs were disproportionately marginalised by society.

We heard the following proposals for change:

- Invest in early intervention for care experienced children.
- Encourage more public bodies to sign up to the Welsh Government's Corporate Parenting Charter.
- Implement a zero exclusion policy across Wales.
- Establish outreach services in STD clinics.
- Place skilled mentors, who specialise in working with vulnerable and marginalised children, in schools to provide support to children.

## Annex A: List of stakeholder event attendees

### 15 May 2024 (missing children)

Organisation	Name(s)
<b>ADSS</b>	Rachel Hawkins Chris Frey-Davies
<b>Action for Children</b>	Sharon Maciver Stuart Barter Gary Bowen-Thomson Lee Bridgeman Hefin Daniels Wynne Randles
<b>CASCADE</b>	Nina Maxwell
<b>Children's Society</b>	Tom Davies
<b>GISDA</b>	Lyndsey Thomas
<b>Llamau</b>	Yvonne Connolly Emma Evans
<b>NYAS</b>	Sharon Lovell Johanne Jones Phoebe White
<b>St Giles</b>	Lee Dutton Evan Jones

### 19 June 2024 (criminalised children)

Organisation	Name(s)
<b>Action for Children</b>	Lee Bridgeman Gary Bowen Thompson
<b>ADSS</b>	Anneka Bartlett Rachel Hawkins Chris Frey-Davies Toni Andrews
<b>Barnardo's</b>	Leah Ward
<b>CASCADE</b>	Nina Maxwell

<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Name(s)</b>
<b>Children's Commissioner for Wales</b>	Rachel Thomas
<b>Children's Society</b>	Tom Davies Holly Sayce
<b>Powys County Council</b>	Ruth Cross
<b>Cardiff City Council Safeguarding Adolescents from Exploitation (SAFE) Team</b>	Steph Mckay Gabi Bazzerra
<b>Llamau</b>	Emma Evans
<b>NYAS</b>	Rob Hill Sarah Jane Davies Phoebe White
<b>St Giles</b>	Lee Dutton Evan Jones
<b>VFCC</b>	Francesca Pritchard