

Children on the margins

Findings of engagement activities

September 2024

During summer 2024 we carried out a series of engagement activities to hear directly from front-line practitioners, policy experts and children 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.

Committee Members, accompanied by Senedd officials, conducted 5 engagement visits/meetings involving front-line practitioners, policy experts and children. More detail about the visits is set out at annex A.

The views set out in this report are those of the stakeholders and children with whom we spoke. They are unattributed to protect their anonymity. 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

Missing children

Nature and scale

1. We heard that during 2020, 3,250 children were recorded as going missing at least once, of which 45% were in the care system. In total, those children went missing a total of 11,939 times. However, inconsistencies in data collection - particularly in the definition of going missing, which leads to different settings being more or less proactive in recording missing episodes - mean that those statistics aren't as reliable as they could be.¹
2. During our engagement work we heard about different risk factors for missing episodes:
 - Children in care in particular regularly go missing, potentially because they are unhappy with their placements. They might want to travel to other local authorities to escape, or to reinvent themselves in a new area.
 - One child we met during our engagement work told us that they went missing because of a breakdown in their family. The child would run away after school to avoid having to go home, where they didn't feel safe.
 - Peer pressure: sometimes children agree with their friends to go missing together.
 - Mental health problems.
 - Problems at home, such as substance abuse or family trauma.
 - Financial reasons: children may go missing to earn money from exploiters.
3. We heard repeatedly that children are at heightened risk of exploitation or harm during missing episodes.

Policy and practice

¹ 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](#)'

Responding to a missing episode

4. We heard that one key challenge for local authorities is knowing where at-risk children are. Every local authority uses its own identification tools and processes referrals differently. Examples of how at-risk children are brought to the attention of statutory services include:

- Alerts from foster carers/parents/youth workers.
- Information from the police (including the British Transport Police).
- Referrals from schools.

Return interviews

5. Stakeholders regularly raised concerns about inconsistencies in how return interviews are conducted across Wales. We heard from some stakeholders that only 6 local authorities recorded that they have information about how many children were offered a return interview following a missing episode.

6. We heard frequent calls for the offer of a return interview following every missing episode to be a statutory requirement, like in England. However, stakeholders stressed that the interview should be at a time and place that suits the young person, and it should be with someone that the young person trusts.

7. Some stakeholders also told us that return interviews are a good opportunity to encourage children in care to take up their right to a independent advocacy.

National Practice Framework

8. Some stakeholders spoke to us about the development of the National Practice Framework, which they hoped would include specific guidance about the multi-agency response to children who go missing. However, development of the framework seems to have paused. It is unclear what stage that work had reached, and what the next steps are.

9. Some professionals also spoke to us about 2 pieces of research on going missing that had been commissioned following a stakeholder roundtable event with the Welsh Government around 2 years ago. That research has not yet been published.

We heard the following proposals for change:

- The statutory requirement for an offer of a return interview for every child who goes missing, to be carried out if the young person wants, when the young person wants, and with whomever the young person wants.

Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE)

Nature and scale

Defining CCE

10. Numerous professionals advocated a statutory definition of CCE. We heard that, although there is [a definition of CCE in Wales' Safeguarding Procedures](#), the definition is not set out in legislation. Consequently, statutory services do not use it consistently to guide their services, nor is there a clear lead agency to drive the response to CCE. One stakeholder told us that the legal framework in the UK is currently holding back services' attempts to prevent criminalisation.

11. We also heard that the lack of a common, agreed definition of CCE results in a lack of understanding of what CCE actually is, and how to respond to it effectively.

12. Professionals told us that different local authorities have different approaches to identifying and reporting children at risk of being criminalised. Higher rates of CCE-related incidents in Welsh Government statistics might reflect more pro-active reporting, rather than a high prevalence of criminal behaviour.

Children at particular risk of criminalisation

13. Different groups of professionals explained to us that many children who get mixed up in criminal activity feel more accepted by the margins of society than they do by their families or mainstream services. One told us that some children actively want to be involved in a gang to feel like they belong, perhaps as a substitute for strong parent figures. Other stakeholders told us that some of the children they work with – who have been involved in criminal activity – are not even aware that they have been exploited, and sometimes don't want support.

14. The following groups of children were also highlighted as being at particular risk of CCE:

- Children involved in antisocial behaviour.

- Vulnerable children approaching 18 years of age, for whom the transition to adulthood can be particularly challenging.

Policy and practice

Responding to CCE

15. One stakeholder working with criminalised children told us that there is – and always has been - a lack of support services for children at risk of being criminalised. Their work was originally intended to expand to early intervention, but has had to continue to focus on the highest risk groups of children due to the levels of demand for the service.

16. Other stakeholders working directly with children involved in criminal activity told us that they felt that there weren't enough consequences for exploiters themselves.

17. We heard that there remain cultural issues with the police, with some reporting their views that who sometimes are inclined to view children as criminals themselves, rather than seeing them as victims. One stakeholder argued that adults who are involved in CCE as exploiters are not convicted for child abuse, they are convicted on drugs-related charges etc. In their view, this demonstrates that the system does not yet recognise that CCE is a form of child abuse.

18. Some stakeholders strongly advocated removing the exploiter from the child, rather than removing the child from their home environment. They argued that current practice of moving the child does not recognise that it is the exploiter, rather than the child, who should be disrupted. They argued that this approach is already taken with Child Sexual Exploitation, and needs to be adopted by statutory agencies in relation to CCE too.

19. We also heard that some children fall between the cracks: they are not entitled to statutory support services because they don't meet the threshold, but are at risk of being exploited. One stakeholder told us that some of these children can be pushed into the criminal justice system, because at least then they will be entitled to some support.

20. Some practitioners who work directly with criminalised children stressed to us that there should be a greater focus on prevention and disrupting criminal gangs and networks that exploit young people. This requires a cultural shift in viewing young people involved in criminal activities as victims of modern slavery,

similar to the shift in perspective on girls who experienced child sexual exploitation.

The National Referral Mechanism (NRM)

21. Stakeholders explained to us that the NRM process is fundamentally designed for non-UK nationals.

22. We heard that although the courts will take CCE into account as a result of NRM referrals, once exploiters know that a child has had an NRM in their name they will give that child additional criminal responsibilities, knowing that the likelihood of them being convicted is lower.

23. Some stakeholders told us that NRMs were pointless, and didn't lead to any additional support being provided to the child.

Responding to marginalised children: common themes

Services provided by the charity sector

24. Charity workers working with at-risk children told us that longer-term commissioning arrangements from local authorities are critical for them to invest in their support arrangements and set up an effective support team.

25. We heard that, although preventative services can be very effective, they often have time-limited interventions, which don't always allow enough time for workers to understand fully what's going on with such vulnerable children, and put in place support to help them.

26. We also heard that trust is also crucial to building relationships with families. Sometimes it is very difficult to build that trust with statutory services, and families aren't always honest with social workers. However, independent charity workers can mediate between the families and social services. We heard that, fundamentally, a lot of the work that skilled charity workers carry out is rooted in child and family advocacy.

27. Some groups of stakeholders felt that services commissioned to charities by local authorities are held to account more rigorously than in-house services. Charities usually have to meet specific targets to demonstrate value for money, when an equivalent in-house service may not have such strict reporting requirements.

28. Some charity professionals argued that contextual safeguarding is key to the effective delivery of preventative services.

Support for parents

29. Some stakeholders strongly advocated Family Group Conferencing, which they argued had supported a cultural shift towards family-centred working. They also stressed the importance of mediation, which they said can help when there are breakdowns in family relationships.

30. Others noted the challenges for parents supporting their children, who are likely to be facing complex risks and/or have experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). We heard that parents are often scared for their children, but don't know how to help them, and are worried that seeking support for their children might lead to their children being removed from their care.

31. Some professionals suggested that the language that professionals use when talking to vulnerable children and their families can be too formal. They advocated more child-centred, informal language to break down barriers between families and professionals.

Social services

32. Stakeholders frequently noted the pressures on social services, which they felt make it challenging for social work teams to work effectively with marginalised children and their families.

33. Others raised concerns about what they saw as the vilification of social workers in the media, which leads to a lack of trust with families and also to recruitment and retention problems within the social care workforce. We heard that it is essential that social services staff support one-another, and raise concerns about stress or anxiety about themselves or their colleagues if necessary.

34. We heard regularly about the prevalence of agency social workers and the high turnover of social work staff, which do not provide the continuity of support that vulnerable children need. One charity professional told us about a child they are currently working with who is 11 years old and has already had 24 different social workers.

35. We also heard about what was seen to be an outdated model of a 'resilient social worker' which was felt to be still prevalent in some social work teams: this

is a social worker who should expect to be able to absorb the tragedy, abuse and pain that they experience in the jobs, without ongoing professional support and therapy to help them manage those emotions.

36. Some professionals felt that social workers' time is so pressured that, as a profession, they are at risk of losing their relationship-building skills. One professional who was nearing the end of her training to become a social worker told us that they had not had any training on maintaining positive relationships with children and their families .

37. We heard strong arguments in favour of social workers who have the right social skills to work with at-risk children, rather than creating specific teams of social workers who specialise in working with children on the margins.

38. One young person told us that while they currently had an excellent social worker, they have had a series of different ones beforehand, and she found it difficult to work with them.

39. Some groups of charity professionals advocated a partnership approach, whereby social workers work alongside specialist charity workers, who engage more informally with children and their families. Some professionals argued that social workers are the ultimate responsible individuals, and this in itself will make it very difficult for them to develop open, trusting relationships with families.

40. We heard specific proposals from some professionals for a pastoral support worker to be based in each secondary school in Wales.

Workforce issues

41. A number of different stakeholders raised concern with us about recruiting and retaining high quality staff who work with vulnerable children. However, some professionals felt that the overall picture was improving.

Multi-agency working

42. We heard consistently that effective multi-agency working, including multi-disciplinary meetings, are essential when responding to complex and challenging cases. Effective communication depends on trust, partnership working, and creating effective professional relationships. We heard that the ability of organisations to invest time into building multi-agency relationships depends largely on their financial context and resourcing pressures. We were

told that local authorities, in particular, sometimes struggle to communicate with each other as efficiently as they should.

43. Some stakeholders advocated the use of multi-disciplinary thematic case audits, where professionals from different teams (and different organisations) can come together to take an honest look at what has happened with specific cases, what went well, and where the response could have been better.

44. We heard regular concerns about the capacity and availability of healthcare professionals to support children at risk of marginalisation, particularly in relation to mental health. Some practitioners told us that children and their families can pin a lot of hope on Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in particular. However, CAMHS might not be the right support service for them, and the child might not ever feel able to speak openly and honestly to medical staff in the way they need to for the support to be effective.

45. We also heard some concern about over-loading families with lots of different support workers. We heard that this can be overwhelming, and that there should be coordination between agencies to work out who should attend particular meetings, and who should offer different elements of support. Some professionals advocated having one trusted person throughout the family's journey to be a point of contact and to lead on the relationship-based work.

46. We heard calls for legislation and policy initiatives to be streamlined to make working with vulnerable children more efficient. For example, some called for one information sharing portal, drawing on inputs from a range of agencies.

The police

47. Some stakeholders stressed to us the importance of trauma-informed policing.

Funding

48. Insufficient funding for preventative services provided by the charity sector was repeatedly flagged as a real concern for an effective multi-agency response to children at risk of marginalisation. One stakeholder told us that if funding is withdrawn for charity sector projects working with marginalised children, no service at all would exist that could provide the levels of support these vulnerable children need.

'Step down' provision

49. We heard from various stakeholders and professionals across sectors that once vulnerable children leave secure accommodation, specialist residential care, or even foster care, there is very little 'step down' provision to support them to take positive onward steps in their lives. They worried that if young people make progress through the support they receive from professionals, once they leave that safe setting they may have no choice but to return to their previous troubled circumstances, and will inevitably face the same risks as before. We heard about shortages of community placements for vulnerable children leaving secure care in particular.

2. Children vulnerable to marginalisation

Care experienced children

50. During our visits we spoke to one young person who had been placed in an unregistered setting. They were miserable there, and felt that they were at risk of harm from other people in the setting.

“They treated me like a dog.”

Unaccompanied asylum seeking children

51. One group of stakeholders raised concerns about unaccompanied asylum seeking children. These children are often particularly vulnerable because they:

- have nobody to support them;
- struggle with language and cultural barriers;
- do not understand the different statutory services (e.g. can believe that everyone working with them is from the Home Office);
- are reluctant to talk about mental health concerns.

They explained that exploiters in the area know where these children are, and find it easy to recruit them.

Children not in an education setting

52. Stakeholders repeatedly highlighted children who are not in full-time education as at a heightened risk of marginalisation. We heard repeated calls for children to be better supported to stay in school.

53. One stakeholder argued that, rather than focusing on zero-exclusion policies, the focus should be on making education more inclusive. They pointed out that, even if you had a zero-exclusion policy in place, this wouldn't guarantee that all vulnerable children would attend school because many children refuse to attend school, even if they have not been excluded.

54. Various professionals who work directly with marginalised children told us that, almost invariably the children (and often other members of their families too) have had a bad experience with education.

55. One group of stakeholders explained to us that sometimes vulnerable children are reluctant to come into school. Children can be excluded on a daily basis, and it can be easier for them not to attend at all.

56. We heard particular concern about educational provision for children who can't get into Pupil Referral Units. We heard repeatedly that schools are hubs for protective, preventative services, and not attending a school is a huge risk factor for children facing marginalisation.

Neurodiverse children and children with additional learning needs

57. Some professionals told us that, in their experience, marginalised children are often neurodiverse in some way. It is important to help those children receive the support they need, including from GPs. Even if waiting lists are long for assessments and diagnoses, it can be important to go through the process to help the child and their family understand any long-term challenges they might face.

58. Other stakeholders shared similar views, and told us that more and more children who have been marginalised have learning needs or are neurodiverse in some way.

Children who have experienced trauma

59. Staff at Hillside Secure Unit told us that, probably without exception, all the children who stay at the unit – whether via local authority referrals or via the Youth Custody Service – have experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Adopting a trauma-informed approach to supporting these children has been a key priority for the management of the centre.

Children suffering from poor mental health

60. We heard that children suffering from poor mental health – and children whose family members suffer from poor mental health – are at an increased risk of short-term family breakdowns. In turn, this can lead to children running away, becoming involved in gangs, or being otherwise exploited.

Annex A: Engagement activities

The Committee contacted key stakeholders in summer 2024 to ask for support in facilitating engagement visits with front-line professionals, children, and policy experts. We accepted as many engagement opportunities as our forward work programme allowed.

Date	Host organisation/event	Summary of engagement activity
27/06/24	Barnardo's (Rapid Response team) Newport	Roundtable discussion with staff employed by Barnardo's as part of their Rapid Response team and Newport City Council staff to support families in crisis. Meeting with a child currently being supported by the Rapid Response team.
27/06/24	NYAS Cymru ('Missing the Point' steering group meeting) Cardiff	Roundtable discussion as part of 'Missing the Point' steering group meeting. Involved staff from NYAS Cymru, Council for Wales of Voluntary Youth Services (CWVYS), The 4Cs, the Children's Commissioning Consortium Cymru, The Children's Society, Media Academy Cymru (MAC), as well as care experienced children, a foster carer and residential care home manager.
27/06/24	Vale of Glamorgan Council Barry	Roundtable discussion with council and Youth Justice staff and frontline support workers.
08/07/24	Action for Children Virtual	Online discussion with Action for Children UK staff.
10/07/24	Hillside Secure Children's Home Neath	Tour of the home, including discussion with care home staff and children at the home. Presentation and roundtable discussion with care home staff and representatives from Neath Port Talbot Council Education Department and Neath Port Talbot Council Children's Services.