



Early Years, Children, Young People and Education Committee Consultation

The Fostering Network's Response

September 2026

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity, bringing together everyone who is involved in the lives of children and young people who are fostered to make foster care the best it can be. As a membership body, The Fostering Network's views are shaped through our projects and programmes as well as our members' participation in advisory boards and forums. We have 4,364 foster carer members in Wales and all 22 local authorities plus 7 independent fostering agencies.

The number of foster carers across Wales has been falling since 2021, while the number of children coming into care remains high. Although the rate of decline has slowed in recent years, the system remains under significant strain. New data we published recently during our Foster Care Fortnight campaign shows that 400 additional foster carers in Wales are required to give children the safe, stable, and loving homes they need. This is despite significant investment in recruitment from the previous Welsh Government, showing that much more needs to be done to retain current foster carers.

Legislation for children's social care

We support the proposals in Bil Pob Plentyn, developed through the Cross-Party Groups on Children and Families and Children in Our Care, which calls on parties to commit to placing a statutory duty on public bodies to actively listen to, protect, and support every child in Wales – regardless of their background or circumstances¹. The

¹ [Children in Wales | Bil Pob Plentyn: a call to enshrine a right for every child in Welsh law](#)

proposals include the full incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into Welsh law and policy, based on the Scottish model.

Plaid Cymru's manifesto for the Senedd elections 2026 included a pledge to establish a new Human Rights Act which included full incorporation of the UNCRC². We believe a priority of the Committee should be to consider the incorporation of the UNCRC to ensure the rights of babies, children and young people are upheld.

We also believe strengthening corporate parenting in Wales should be a priority and the Committee should consider how Wales can move beyond voluntary commitments and towards mandatory corporate parenting frameworks for all relevant public bodies.

The previous Government consulted on adding a dedicated section on corporate parenting to the Part 6 Code of Practice³. Following that, a second consultation was opened on the proposed amendments to the Part 6 Code of Practice⁴. The final draft of the updated Code is still yet to be published. Whilst we are pleased that there is recognition that corporate parenting responsibilities need to be strengthened, the Part 6 Code should be statutory, rather than good practice.

Innovative practice such as Newport's Community Parenting Strategy demonstrates how a local authority can develop a measurable model that engages public services, community and private sector to provide coordinated support⁵. However, without clear statutory corporate parenting duties for public bodies, there remains a question around accountability and consistency across Wales, and how outcomes for care experienced babies, children and young people will be monitored at a national level.

Other UK nations have already strengthened corporate parenting through legislation. In England, corporate parenting duties have been strengthened through the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026⁶ and will now apply to all public bodies. In Scotland, corporate parenting duties extend to health boards, police, universities and Ministers and the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Act 2026⁷ extended responsibilities to all young people up to 26.

² [For Wales - The Party of Wales](#)

³ [Our response to the consultation on corporate parenting: Part 6 code of practice 2025](#)

⁴ [Our response to the Welsh Government's consultation on Changes to two codes of practice 2026](#)

⁵ [Community parenting | Newport City Council](#)

⁶ [Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026](#)

⁷ [Children \(Care, Care Experience and Services Planning\) \(Scotland\) Act 2026](#)

We would welcome the Committee prioritising a statutory corporate parenting framework for Wales to strengthen accountability and improve outcomes for care experienced babies, children and young people.

Prevention and early intervention

The Welsh Government's Early Intervention and Prevention Framework (2026) aims to reduce the number of babies, children and young people entering the care system⁸. Data from Welsh Government shows the number of children in care in Wales remains high; on 31 March 2025, 7,072 children were looked after in Wales and of those, 79% of children looked after's legal status was under a care order and 68% of children looked after were placed in foster care placements⁹.

This highlights the need for sustained investment in early intervention and family support services that prevent difficulties from escalating and enable children to remain safely with their families wherever possible.

We would particularly welcome continued support of The Fostering Network's Step Up Step Down (SUSD) programme that has been piloted in Pembrokeshire and Powys. The programme supports families on the edge of care with the aim of reducing the number of children coming into care and improving outcomes for children and families.

CASCADE recently conducted an evaluation of the Step Up Step Down pilot in Pembrokeshire.¹⁰ They reported 'in the evaluation period, 12 families (23 children) successfully stepped down from the service, with an average involvement of 14 months. Among families who engaged with the programme in Pembrokeshire, the service achieved a 95% success rate, with 22 of the 23 children supported maintaining care arrangements at home. At the end of the evaluation period, the service was supporting 11 families (26 children), with an additional five families awaiting allocation.' This project is ongoing and CASCADE will be evaluating the implementation of the programme in Powys.

We would welcome the Committee to consider how this can be used to inform future policy and support an expansion of Step Up Step Down to be rolled out across Wales.

⁸ [Early Intervention and Prevention Framework to support Babies, Children, Young People and Families in Wales](#)

⁹ [Children looked after by local authorities: April 2024 to March 2025 \[HTML\] | GOV.WALES](#)

¹⁰ [Step Up Step Down – CASCADE](#)

Improved data:

Fostering data collection has improved in recent years, particularly through Welsh Government's Removing Profit reports which now publish data on fostering households. However, there are significant gaps in the data that is published in Wales compared with other UK nations. For example, unlike England, Wales does not publish data on the total number of approved foster carers, making it more difficult to understand recruitment and retention trends.

There is also insufficient published data on children placed outside their local authority. While figures are available on the number of children living outside their local authority, there is limited information on the reasons for these placements. Understanding whether children are being placed at a distance due to a shortage of local foster families, support needs, sibling placement requirements or other factors is essential. Our understanding is that local authorities will be making more information on this publicly available through the annual sufficiency plans following the implementation of removing profit from children's social care in Wales.

A further area requiring attention is the experience of siblings in care. Other UK nations already collect and publish more detailed information on sibling groups being placed together or apart and the reasons for separation. Scotland has specific legislation to protect sibling relationships for children in care¹¹, while England has recently introduced a right to maintain contact with siblings to be strengthened in law for children in care¹². In contrast, Wales currently has no equivalent statutory framework. Also, Wales does not currently publish data on how many siblings are separated, the reasons for those decisions, or the longer-term outcomes of being separated. Our foster carer members have told us that maintaining sibling relationships often falls to them, with varying levels of support and guidance from local authorities.

Following consultation with stakeholders, the previous Committee's Radical Reform Inquiry identified several other gaps in the data available across children's social care in Wales, including information relating to children in care, care leavers and the children's social care workforce¹³. We would welcome a greater focus on strengthening consistent data collection and transparency across children's social care and fostering in Wales.

¹¹ [Keeping siblings together - Looked after children - gov.scot](https://gov.scot/keeping-siblings-together)

¹² [New legislation to keep brothers and sisters connected in care - GOV.UK](https://gov.uk/new-legislation-to-keep-brothers-and-sisters-connected-in-care)

¹³ [If not now, then when? Radical reform for care experienced children and young people](https://gov.uk/if-not-now-then-when-radical-reform-for-care-experienced-children-and-young-people)

Improved data would help the sector better understand and respond to the experiences of children, families and foster carers.

Improved mental health support and trauma informed approaches

A report from Public Health Wales shows mental health crises among children and young people is growing in Wales.¹⁴ The Committee should prioritise examining whether care experienced children and young people in Wales are receiving timely and consistent access to mental health support, and whether existing arrangements are meeting their needs.

The Radical Reform Inquiry recommended that the Welsh Government introduce legislation to give all care experienced children a right to access specialist therapeutic mental health support, including a statutory entitlement to regular assessments of their needs and access to appropriate services. While the Welsh Government accepted the importance of strengthening support, it did not commit to creating a new statutory right, instead they stated work was already underway to improve provision¹⁵.

However, the experiences of care experienced children and foster carers continue to demonstrate that access to mental health and therapeutic support remains inconsistent across Wales. Children in care are significantly more likely to have experienced trauma which can have a lasting impact on emotional wellbeing and development. Despite this, support is not always available, and access can vary considerably between areas. Our State of the Nation's 2024 report found that 40% of foster carers in Wales said at least one child they foster is receiving mental health or wellbeing support or is on a waiting list for support. One foster carer reported "it has taken us 5 years to obtain mental health support for the child we care for." And 37% of foster carers responded that they are fostering a child who needs mental health support but isn't getting it, which increased from 30% in 2021.¹⁶

While support services may exist, the question is whether care experienced children can reliably access the right support at the right time, regardless of where they live in Wales. A statutory entitlement to preventative support rather than a reliance on crisis services would establish greater consistency and recognise the unique experiences and trauma history of children in care and care leavers.

¹⁴ [Health-Needs-Assessment-Mental-Health-of-Babies-Children-and-Young-People-in-Wales.pdf](#)

¹⁵ [gen-ld15931-r-e.pdf](#)

¹⁶ [final-sotn-spotlight-on-wales.pdf](#)

Foster carers receive training to provide therapeutic care and support children who have often experienced significant trauma. However, our foster carer members consistently tell us that they are not always listened to when raising concerns about the children in their care, particularly in relation to mental health and neurodiversity. Many report spending considerable time advocating for the children and young people to access assessments and appropriate support. Earlier intervention and better partnership working would help prevent needs from escalating.

Our Wales Youth Advisory Board's 'Foster Our Better Lives' campaign calls on adults to listen to and respect young people's lived experiences and respond in a trauma-informed way. The campaign emphasises the importance of building relationships and highlights how delays in accessing support can leave young people feeling unheard. It reinforces the need for all members in the team around the child to have a shared understanding of trauma and work together to provide timely and appropriate support¹⁷.

When I am Ready evaluation:

We are pleased to be supporting CASCADE with their evaluation of the When I Am Ready scheme as we have been told by our members that there are many barriers and challenges to When I Am Ready arrangements. This evaluation presents an important opportunity to understand whether the scheme is delivering its intended outcomes consistently across Wales and what changes may be needed.

Our foster carer members consistently tell us that the current arrangements do not always reflect the reality of long-term family relationships. For many young people, turning 18 coincides with a critical period of transition as they complete education, enter employment, or prepare for university. Yet at the same time they may be required to navigate significant changes to their legal and financial relationship with their foster carers. Worryingly, the recent review of early deaths of care leavers in England identified 18 years of age as a significant crisis point¹⁸. Wales has not conducted a similar review, nor do Wales publish national data on the number of care leaver deaths. More needs to be done to support young people during their transition to adulthood in a child-centred, trauma informed way.

Foster carers regularly raise concerns about the financial framework underpinning the scheme. In our State of the Nations' survey, over four in five (85%) of foster carers said

¹⁷ [Foster Our Better Lives Wales | The Fostering Network](#)

¹⁸ [Review of early deaths of care leavers - GOV.UK](#)

they are worse off financially as a result of offering post-foster care¹⁹. Young people may be required to claim benefits and enter tenancy arrangements, while foster carers experience a reduction in financial support once fostering allowances end. This can create unnecessary pressure at a time when stability should be the priority. We believe Welsh Government should ensure that When I Am Ready is properly costed and fully funded.

Foster carers also risk changing their approval status if they are no longer caring for another child under 18 upon entering a When I Am Ready arrangement. This can result in foster carers not taking up When I Am Ready or leaving fostering. There is a need to strengthen fostering regulations in respect of assessments for foster carers who provide permanency, with recognition of approval status past 18 years of age to enable foster carers to continue their approval and commitment.

We would encourage the Committee to prioritise When I Am Ready, engage with the evaluation's findings and urgently consider how any recommendations can be implemented meaningfully and consistently across Wales so as many young people as possible can benefit from the stability it offers.

National Register for foster carers:

The previous Welsh Government accepted in part the recommendation of a national register for foster carers following the Radical Reform Inquiry in 2023. In their response to the recommendation, Welsh Government accepted that a national register would improve the status of foster carers, address the difficulty foster carers experience when moving from one service to another and would offer a robust safeguarding mechanism. The financial implications and complexity of introducing a national register were mentioned as barriers to implementation.

Following this, the previous Government opened a consultation on changes to fostering which included scoping a potential national register for foster carers²⁰. 81% of foster carers said they would support the introduction of a register in response to our members survey. Since then, Welsh Government responded that they would continue to explore the feasibility, purpose, and potential models for improving information-sharing and support across the fostering community. However, there has been no further update or information on a national register for foster carers.

¹⁹ [final-sotn-spotlight-on-wales.pdf](#)

²⁰ [Our response to the Welsh Government consultation on improving fostering services 2025](#)

Scotland have introduced a pilot for a register in their Promise Act, and we would like to see Wales do the same. We believe a national register would improve the status of foster carers, as currently they are caring for babies, children and young people 24 hours a day, 7 days week but are the only person in the team around the child who provide formal care for children who do not have to be registered with a central body.

A national register would greatly improve the collection of national data about the number of available foster carers in each local authority which would help improve matching and information sharing which could help reduce placement breakdown, improving stability and ensure more children remain closer to their families, communities, schools and support networks. It could also reduce the need for out-of-area placements and reduce the number of foster carers with vacant placements.

Additionally, it could improve safeguarding measures as it would provide a clearer record of a foster carer's approval history and help ensure consistent information is available as to whether someone has previously been de-registered for safeguarding reasons.

Finally, it could support foster carer portability by enabling carers to transfer more smoothly and efficiently between fostering services if they need to change service or move location.

Virtual Schools and Personal Education Plans:

Improving education outcomes for care experienced children and young people should be prioritised, including the implementation of the Virtual School Model in Wales.

In December 2025, Welsh Government published an independent evaluation of the Virtual School Model pilot²¹, which identified a range of positive impacts including:

- Improved data collection and monitoring systems
- Improved awareness and upskilling of staff
- Improved collaboration and partnership working
- Provision of a single point of access for information about children looked after
- Improved quality and timeliness of producing Personal Education Plans (PEPs)

Welsh Government stated that the findings would inform future policy development²², however, there is no clear implementation plan. To our knowledge, there are currently

²¹ [Evaluation of the VSM pilot funding Executive Summary English](#)

²² [Care experienced learners supported by innovative pilot programme | GOV.WALES](#)

only 4 local authorities with an established Virtual School. In England, there is a duty for all local authorities to have a Virtual School Head, and we would like to see this in Wales too. Consistency in support for care experienced learners across Wales remains an issue. As multiple local authorities are often involved in a child's education, differing PEP formats and planning processes can unnecessarily complicate arrangements and delay support. The attainment gap for care experienced children widens as they progress through the educational stages²³ and so more oversight is needed in this area.

We would welcome the Committee's oversight of this work to seek clarity on whether a Virtual School Model with a dedicated Virtual School Headteacher will be implemented across Wales, and how its impact on educational outcomes will be measured. And if there is no clarification on this, we would like to see a push for a duty in legislation.

²³ [Educational Pathways and Outcomes for Care-experienced Children | PDF to Flipbook](#)