



# **HER Story**

**The Impact of Project Unity in Wales**





# Foreword

I am delighted to share with you the story of HER Story, a report detailing the difference NYAS Cymru's Project Unity service is making to the lives of care-experienced girls and young women across Wales who are pregnant and/or have children. Project Unity started when NYAS Cymru became increasingly concerned with the number of care-experienced girls and young women who were approaching us for advocacy when they were pregnant and their babies were the subject of child protection procedures. Our aim was to support young women to stay together with their babies, wherever is safe to do so, and prevent more children entering care in Wales.

HER Story focuses on the outcomes of research completed with care-experienced young women across Wales during 2024 who have worked with Project Unity, to understand their experiences of the service.

We would like to thank all the girls and young women who bravely shared their stories with us and continue to use their voices to help us create change. We would also wish to thank the staff who work so hard to provide Project Unity across Wales. Your dedication and commitment is incredible.



Sharon Lovell, MBE  
**Chief Executive**  
**NYAS Cymru**

This report has been produced in coproduction with girls and young women and supported by Dr Anne Crowley.

# About Project Unity

Project Unity provides one-to-one emotional and practical support to care-experienced girls and young women as they try to navigate care and child protection proceedings in relation to their baby, child or children. The service enables and empowers girls and young women to create and sustain a loving family for themselves and their babies and children. Since 2020, Project Unity has worked with nearly 800 women and girls across Wales.

Care experienced young women are more likely than the general population to become young parents. Research on what happens after young people become parents indicates that while early parenthood can be a positive experience, parenting experiences can be negatively impacted by previous trauma, stigma, accommodation challenges, mental health challenges, experiences of poverty and an absence of informal support. Some parents cope well despite these adversities, but there is an emerging evidence base to suggest that care experienced young women are more likely to experience state intervention and/or separation from their children.

A pilot of NYAS Cymru's Project Unity was first established in South Wales in 2017. Subject to an independent evaluation, in 2020 the Welsh Government funded a roll out of the project across the whole of Wales under its Sustainable Social Services Third Sector Grant (SSG).

## Project Unity Support

All care experienced young women receive wraparound, intensive, and holistic support from NYAS Cymru which can involve help from pregnancy to any support with legal hearings and adoption. We also provide support for resettlement in their own accommodation with their baby and or/children. Project Unity provides the following to girls and young women:

- Support to ensure their rights are upheld and protected.
- Formal representation during care protection procedures, helping them to participate in meetings, access legal advice, manage transitions between various placements, support during parenting assessments and manage contact arrangements if applicable.
- Support with independent living, accessing housing services, support to set up homes to enable a safe and stable environment for them and their babies and/or children.
- Financial information in relation to benefits and entitlements.
- Signposting to other specialist services which can include mental health and domestic abuse organisations.



# Peer Led Evaluation

NYAS Cymru's Project Unity regularly consults and collaborates with the girls and young women who use the service. Their views and experiences have informed the direction of the project, including the name and identity. Young women have been engaged in consultations with the Children's Commissioner for Wales and Cardiff University and made an outstanding contribution to an inquiry into services for care-experienced children and young people in Wales led by the Children, Young People and Education Committee in 2023.

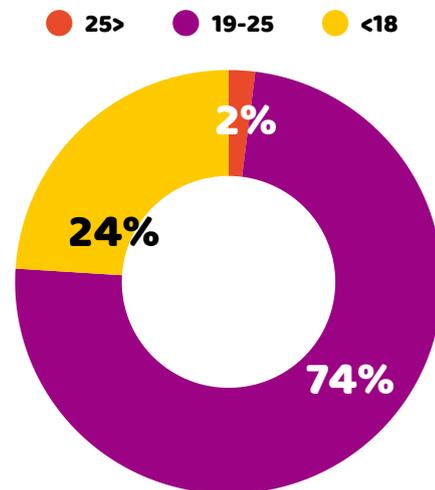
## Methodology of Evaluation

Between September to November 2024, we conducted research, using surveys and focus groups, with young women who have worked with Project Unity to understand the impact the service has had on their lives.

The survey questionnaire was sent out via email and text messages to 70 young women who had been, or were still, being supported by Project Unity. 50 young women responded from across 16 local authorities in Wales. 37 of the young women were aged between 19 and 25, 12 were under the age of 18 years old and one woman was over 25 years old.

Six focus groups were held during October and November across Cardiff, Swansea, Neath Port Talbot, Cwmbran, Caerphilly, Wrexham, and Gwynedd. The groups were convened in

community venues that are accessible by public transport and suitable for babies and young children. Play areas and childcare was also made available. The majority of the young women participating were aged between 17-24 (86%) and the remainder were aged between 25 and 28.



Age of survey participants



## Pregnancy and Finding Project Unity

Young women were asked how they first came to know about Project Unity. **Over a third** of the young women who responded to the survey had been referred by a Social Worker and **just under 1 in 10** had been referred by a Young Person’s Advisor. Nearly **a fifth** had been referred by their midwife or health visitor, and a similar number had been referred to Project Unity through another NYAS Cymru service, for example, an advocate or following a ‘return home interview’.

**75%** of the young women who responded to the survey said they were pregnant when first referred to Project Unity (see Figure 1). Of these, **a third** remembered being referred in the first trimester (0-3 months), **half** were in their second trimester (4-6 months) and **16%** were in their third trimester (7-9 months).

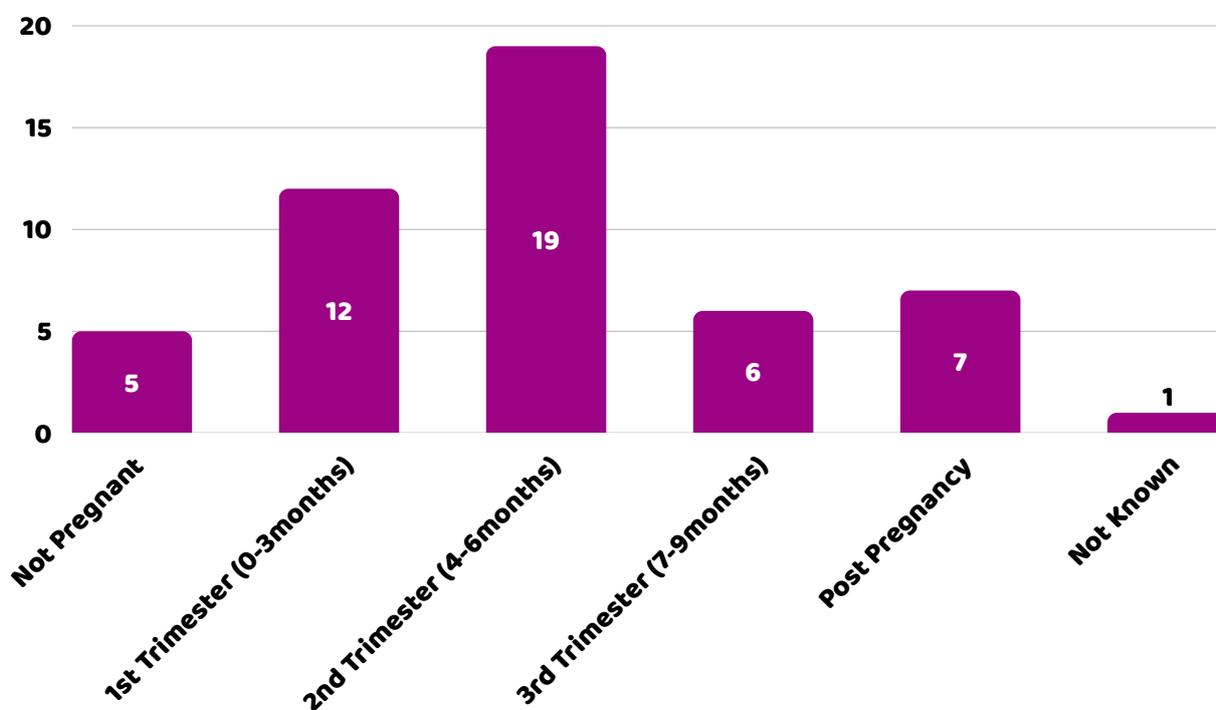


Figure one: How far into pregnancy young women were when first referred to Project Unity



## Child Protection

**86%** of the young women who responded to the survey said they were subject to child protection proceedings during their pregnancy or just after the baby was born. The majority of these (**91%**), said they were pregnant, with the remainder of young women reporting being subject to proceedings soon after delivery of their baby.

**38** of the young women, (**76%**), thought that their own care experience had influenced the decision for their unborn child or children to be subject to child protection proceedings. **Seven** young women (**14%**) did not think that their care experience influenced the decision and **five** (**10%**) were unsure.

The young women frequently said that they thought it was 'routine' for care-experienced young mothers to be referred to children's services:



*"The local authority was at my door the minute I had the pregnancy confirmed by my GP. They said it was their policy to ensure I had the appropriate support as a care leaver."*

*"The midwife informed me that all care-experienced mothers have to be referred to social services."*

*"I have been in care since I was 12 and when I found out I was pregnant they told me because I am care-experienced my baby will go on the child protection register."*

Some young women explained that they felt that the local authority did not trust them and discriminated against, or judged them because of their care history:

*"They know I have been in care, and they don't trust us. Because I lived in care, they now think I can't care for my baby."*

*"I was told it was because I had been in care and also my age, but other friends of my age have not been referred as they haven't been in care."*

*"Social knew me from my past - they said that they would help, but they judged me and took my babies."*



Many of the young women responding to the survey or attending the focus groups spoke of how powerless and targeted they felt just because they had been in care as a child:

*“I felt picked on and different - why do they think I would hurt my baby?”*

*“I am marked as a care-experienced young person, and no one believes that I am capable of being a parent.”*

One young woman who was keen to challenge these attitudes felt that:

*“It feels that all pregnancies are subject to child protection because we are care-experienced, but with the help of Project Unity, we want to change that.”*

Many of the young women participating in the focus groups expected that any subsequent pregnancy they had would be subject to child protection concerns because they are care experienced. **Two** young women who participated in the focus groups stated that they had chosen not to have another baby because they did not want to go through the trauma of losing their child to social services. One said she had a termination rather than proceed with her second pregnancy because she was so terrified they would take her baby.

NYAS Cymru wanted to find out if we had been successful in reducing the numbers of children entering care and the numbers of care-experienced young women involved with the child protection system from the young women’s direct views. What follows is qualitative information on their experiences.

In the focus groups, **a third** of young women had given birth to a second child since they had become engaged with Project Unity on a first pregnancy. This data provides some insights into the impact of Project Unity on reducing the numbers of children entering care in Wales and achieving a reduction in the numbers of care-experienced young mothers in the child protection system.

Typically, the young women who had got to know about the support from Project Unity on their first pregnancy and then **referred themselves to Project Unity early on in their second pregnancy**. For example, two young women who had lost their first children to adoption, indicated that the fact that they had learnt about their rights from Project Unity and understood the child protection process really helped them ‘the second time around’. **The outcome of these two cases was that young women’s babies were able to remain in their care.**

Additionally, two young women said their most recent pregnancies had not been subject to child protection proceedings. One young woman said that child protection concerns had been raised but were dismissed after the assessment. One young woman thought that the fact that a PLO, (Public Law Outline), for her second baby was not initiated was down to the fact that Project Unity were involved **'early on' in the pregnancy.**

Many of the young women that we have worked with who still have their babies living with them, have all said it is because they had worked with Project Unity. Overall, **94%** of the women we surveyed told us Project Unity was 'very helpful' to them. One young woman told her story of taking her baby home and stated it was definitely because she was working with Project Unity:

*"This is the second time I have been with Project Unity, the first time my baby was adopted but they stayed with me every step, this time I'm taking my baby home, and I couldn't have done it without them."*

*"Project Unity have supported me when I thought no one cared, they have helped me to have a voice, and now I have my baby home."*

## **Engagement with Children's Services**

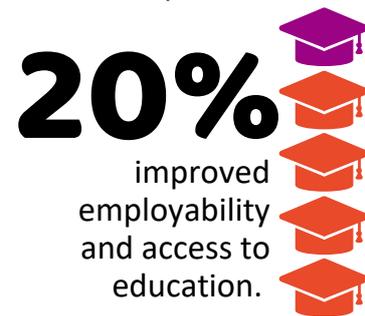
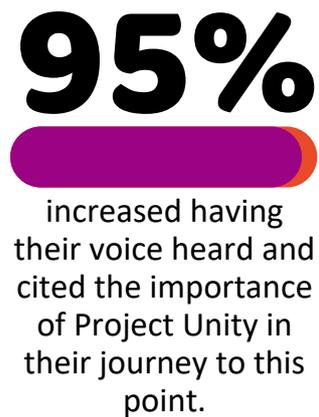
From our data collection, there was evidence that that Project Unity's involvement had helped to improve the quality of the relationships between the young women and children's services. The majority of young women participating in the focus groups reported very negative experiences with children's services both as a child in care and now as a mother of a child who was the subject of child protection concerns:

*"I have had a very negative experience since they took both my children, they failed to safeguard me as a child and then have overly safeguarded my own children."*

*"I had a very negative experience with social services, they believed we harmed our children and took them into foster care. Even after it was proved me and my partner were innocent we still had to fight for our children and jump through hurdles to get them back. During the investigation our voice was often not listened to and I felt very much like a number to them rather than an actual person. My past and my partner's past was brought up a lot, however this does not prevent me from being a good mother."*

Some of the young women who had a second pregnancy reported having a **more positive experience of children's services the 'second time around' because of Project Unity's involvement.** A **third** of the young women on their second pregnancies reported feeling more empowered to speak up this time because of their involvement with Project Unity. They had all requested help from Project Unity **early on in their (second) pregnancy** because of their previous experiences.

## Impact On Girls and Young Women



100% of the young women who responded to the survey said they would recommend Project Unity to another care-experienced young mother subject to child protection proceedings. All the young women participating in the focus groups stated that they would request the support of Project Unity on any subsequent pregnancies because the project's support had been such a help to them.

### After working with Project Unity, care-experienced mothers have reported:

- Improved confidence and resilience.
- Improved knowledge of support services, sexual health, health relationships, gender equality and body image.
- Increased skills, including communication.
- Improved likelihood of their child not being removed out of their care.

*"Project Unity has helped me immensely; without them I probably would have not gotten my children."*

*"I realised I could play a part in society and my voice mattered. Without Project Unity I would never have known that."*

*"Project Unity gave me a voice and an opportunity to have my say while making sure I was OK."*

*"Project Unity cared and were there for me every step of the way – thank you!"*

*"I felt reassured that I had someone who was telling me what was going on and why, and what I could do to make things better."*



## Suggestions for Further Change

When we asked young women how Project Unity could be improved, only a few suggestions were made. Most young women thought the project was great as it is, but there were three main suggestions for making the project even better:

### Early Intervention of an active offer:

Project Unity should be offered to all care-experienced girls and young women when they become pregnant. Many young women called for this to happen routinely. Several young women expressed their own frustration in only finding out about Project Unity, (through their social worker or midwife), at a late stage in their pregnancy – this they believed adversely affected their chances of being allowed to parent their child:

*“I wish I had support from the very beginning of when social services had concerns.”*

1

### Mental Health and Wellbeing Support Should be Available for Care-Experienced Young Mothers:

Some young women also wanted to see Project Unity **provide some wellbeing, counselling and trauma therapy**. One young woman explained that Project Unity had supported her when she had a miscarriage but explained that at the time she felt she had needed more support.

*“I would like maybe for the project to offer some counselling or trauma therapy as this will help me deal with my past issues and help with some of my mental health.”*

2

### Build a Community of Peer Support for Care-Experienced Young People:

Project Unity should continue creating more opportunities to meet up with ‘Project Workers and girls like me’. As one young woman said:

*“I would like a regular chance to meet Project Workers and other girls like me. Maybe once a month, to just chat about what is happening and get reassurance. To help me in the next stage which hopefully will be when I get a flat and go to college.”*

3

## **What Next - Aiming High - TogetHER**

NYAS Cymru is a human rights charity supporting some of the most vulnerable children/young people in Wales. We exist to improve outcomes for care-experienced children/young people and ensure their voices are heard by decision-makers. We help young people get things stopped, started, or changed – ensuring their rights are respected and upheld. Our Unity programme works exclusively with young women and girls in care. We have supported over 500 referrals to date, with 90% reporting gender-based discrimination during pregnancy. Many feel stigmatised due to their care experience, with their parenting being assessed through formal child protection processes.

Through the co-production evaluation with young women, which is highlighted in this paper, NYAS Cymru want to create a new sister project to Unity; entitled: TogetHER. Developed through collaboration, the name reflects both unity and the goal “to get her” the support she needs. The project focuses on achieving gender equality and tackling discrimination, based on priorities identified by young women themselves, We will:

1. Create systemic change for 3,500 care-experienced young women and girls by undertaking a review of the assessment process for child protection. We will run a national steering group with key stakeholders, including representation from the voluntary sector, local authorities, Welsh Government, and Children’s Commissioners Office to achieve this. We will create a national framework to create a pathway of support to pregnant young women in the care system in Wales to ensure they keep their babies; whenever safe to do so.
2. We will provide direct mental health and wellbeing support for up to 150 young women through an eight-week programme including sessions to promote, protect, and advance young women’s mental health. This will include signposting to specialist organisations and working in partnership with groups such as Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA), Council for Wales of Voluntary Youth Services (CWVYS), Children in Wales, CAMHS, Platform, and Voices from Care for specialist counselling referrals.

**NYAS Cymru will always be on the side of children and young people.**

# HER Story

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**Document in English**

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Tel: 0808 808 1001

E: [help@nyas.net](mailto:help@nyas.net)

[www.nyas.net](http://www.nyas.net)

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NYAS (National Youth Advocacy Service), Tower House, 1 Tower Road, Birkenhead, Wirral, CH41 1FF | Registered Charity No: 1012485