

Covid-19 and Care-experienced Children and Young People

Perspectives and evidence gathered by NYAS Cymru

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1. Introduction

We are living in unprecedented times. Lockdown and social distancing measures are affecting us all and we wanted to give you an insight into some of the specific issues facing care-experienced children and young people living in Wales.

NYAS Cymru (National Youth Advocacy Service Wales) is a leading children's rights charity that supports and empowers care-experienced children and young people across Wales by providing statutory independent advocacy provision.

NYAS Cymru has been working with over 500 care-experienced children and young people since the lockdown began, providing projects and services such as advocacy, independent visiting, mentoring, youth participation and mental health support. We also work closely with Police and Crime Commissioners to protect young people from exploitation, and offer intensive advocacy for young care-experienced mothers. We know this is a particularly challenging time for the children and young people we work with.

As recognition of our work in the children and young people sector, NYAS Cymru recently joined an advisory group to the Welsh Government, working to ensure the support and safety of vulnerable children and young people during the current Covid-19 crisis.

While continuing our work with care-experienced children and young people, NYAS Cymru also undertook a qualitative study with individuals to reveal a snapshot of current issues affecting them during the lockdown. This report directly includes the voices of young people both from this study and our wider advocacy case work involving over 500 children and young people in total. We will continue to always be on the side of children and young people during this time; ensuring their issues are part of decision making processes and upholding their rights and entitlements.

Sharon Lovell National Executive Director, NYAS Cymru.

Ben Twomey Head of Policy and Research.

2. Key statistics

500+ Children and young people supported by NYAS Cymru since the lockdown began	3 in 5 Children in care told us they have felt lonely more often since lockdown started	Half Of children in care told us they are feeling more anxious during the lockdown
1 in 4 Care leavers told us they had not been in contact with their personal adviser since the lockdown began	1 in 7 Children and young people in care said they had not been in contact with their social worker since lockdown	Every Child and young person we surveyed understood why a lockdown was happening in Wales

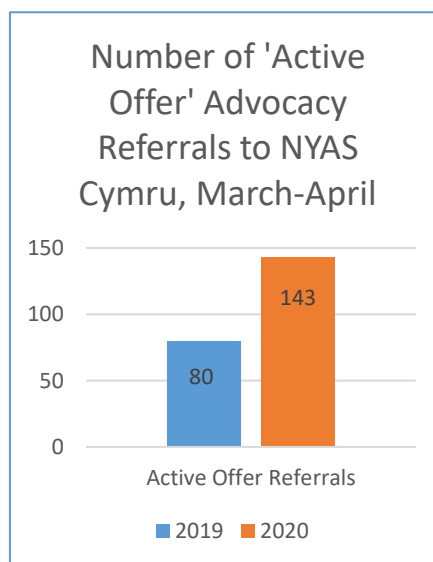
3. Independent advocacy

NYAS Cymru has been working closely with local authorities to promote the rights of children and young people to access independent advocacy, and to highlight their duties under the National Approach to Advocacy in Wales. Advocacy is vital to safeguarding children and young people, and alongside our all-Wales projects and campaigns, we are currently contracted to provide statutory advocacy services in the following local authority areas:

Blaenau Gwent	Caerphilly	Cardiff	Monmouthshire
Newport	Torfaen	Vale of Glamorgan	

NYAS Cymru welcomed the reference to advocacy within the Welsh Government’s delivery plan and guidance to local authorities, acting as a reminder to all social care staff to actively offer advocacy to every child young person who becomes entitled. We continue to work with Children’s Services Commissioners to ensure that every child entering care receives an active offer of advocacy support.

In March and April, our active offer advocacy referrals have increased in five out of the seven local authorities in which we hold contracts, while staying the same in one and falling in one. Because of the vital work we do to support and safeguard children and young people, NYAS Cymru has not furloughed any staff.



4. Contact with social workers or personal advisers

We are hearing from children and young people, as well as through our professionals’ experiences, of some difficulties reaching social workers and social services during the pandemic. This has been most challenging for the young care-experienced mothers we support, many of whom have not had clear communication with social services since lockdown began. For some of these young mothers whose children are in care, they have found it particularly difficult not being able to see their children and struggling to rearrange contact if they miss calls from foster carers.

Some young mothers have noted that they are confused as to what is happening with their meetings with social services, as the initial lack of information they received when lockdown began has at times been confounded with miscommunication, such as independent reviewing officers’ agreeing cancellations with social workers but no one informing the mother. Our Project Unity is finding that care-experienced young mothers are a particularly vulnerable group at this time, because their previously limited network of

support is even further strained. We are working with Local Authorities in partnership to improve communication where challenges have been faced.

Our survey sample indicated that 77% of children in care are having contact with their social worker about the same amount now as they were before the lockdown. 8% reported less contact their social worker, while 15% reported more. It is worth considering that contact is often made by the social worker rather than the child/young person, and in our case work we've found that children and young people in some areas do not have a direct contact number for their social workers and have found it difficult to reach them when needed.

Meanwhile exactly half of the care leavers we surveyed told us they have had about the same amount of contact with their personal adviser as before the lockdown, while the other half told us they have had less contact.

In context, our survey opened over three weeks after lockdown began, and ran until six weeks in. Of serious concern was that one in seven (14%) children in care told us they had not had any contact from their social worker since lockdown began, and one in four (25%) care leavers told us they had not had any contact from their personal adviser. Given the dramatic changes to personal freedoms and day-to-day life experienced during the lockdown, it seems to be a uniquely important time for some form of contact, given that care-experienced children and young people are reporting increased levels of loneliness and anxiety.

5. Health

We are hearing of children and young people being unable or unwilling to attend their medical appointments. Some young mothers report being anxious about taking their children to medical appointments because they fear coming into contact with the COVID-19 virus.

6. Mental health

In NYAS Cymru's dialogue with Welsh Government, we have called for a pause to any children and young people being moved on from CAMHS to Adult Mental Health Services. This is a risky and sometimes mismanaged period in normal times, but pausing this transition now will save lives. We are hopeful that a clear policy on this will be developed as a priority.

We know that isolation for some children has been challenging, and our services have seen a rise in children and young people presenting with mental health issues. 60% of children in care and every care leaver that we surveyed told us they felt lonely more often during the lockdown. Similarly, 57% of children in care and every care leaver that we surveyed told us they were feeling more anxious. While our survey data offers a snapshot, we are hearing these concerns routinely in our other services and support work. Our staff are attending virtual weekly SPACE panels (team around the family for mental health services), and these are leading to referrals for advocacy support.

Our Newid mental health project has also been pro-active during this period of lockdown. We have set up daily drop-in support clinics for young people, parents and carers to gain support and resources for low-level mental health concerns. This support is also available for staff to support progression of cases which present mental health concerns.

**Young People's Mental Health and Well-being.
1:1 support and Zoom meetings for young people,
parents and carers from NYAS Cymru**

Monday to Thursday 1 – 3 pm.

Please contact Jo on:

07990 772088



7. Safeguarding and child protection

The decrease in numbers of children subject to child protection interventions are most worrying. We are concerned with how they are being kept safe and who they are able to turn to. We welcome the efforts by the Welsh Government and local police forces to communicate that it is legitimate to leave home during the lockdown if fleeing domestic violence. However, more emphasis in these campaigns could also be given to signposting and safeguarding children and young people who are victims of witnesses of abuse.

We are also aware that some partners have seen an increase in calls for low level domestic abuse from adults not known to police or from those who do not normally report. NYAS Cymru has offered advocacy support for the children and young people in the home to increase the ability to safeguard. The reduction in child protection meetings, possibly linked to schools being closed and so fewer issues being reported, is directly at odds with media reports of more abuse and violence in the home. Safeguarding must be a central focus for all agencies working with children and young people during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We are pleased with the openness of Welsh Government to work with the sector at this time, and welcomed reassurance that there are no plans to pursue legislation without consultation that undermines rights and protections for children and young people, which has happened in England under the UK Government's Statutory Instrument 445.

8. Access to technology

Every care-experienced child and young person needs to be able to access technology in order to stay connected and supported during the pandemic and measures such as the lockdown.

Care leavers and young people not in education or training are among the most likely to struggle with this and many have informed us this is the case. We were concerned that the focus on technology for those in formal education would exclude this group. Their learning, wellbeing and day-to-day activity (such as online shopping if self-isolating) could be dependent on access to the right technology during the lockdown.

This topic invites broader questions, not just about access to devices but also internet connection, money for credit on phones, and how children can stay safe online. The quotes later in this report (section 13a) outline a range of issues in young people's own words. NYAS Cymru is hoping the WCVA emergency fund will secure our aim to support young people with this issue.

NYAS Cymru is also working particularly creatively to ensure we continue to engage with young children during this time of virtual case work.

9. Missing children

We have asked Welsh Government to ensure consistent and independent debriefs (return home interviews) for children and young people who go missing across Wales. The risks of criminalisation or harm are heightened during the lockdown.

Although they may not be reported missing, we are hearing of children going out in breach of lockdown rules and not abiding by social distancing. We welcome the College of Policing's clarity that police enforcement must always be a last resort.

We are also aware of the rise in child trafficking cases, which we understand is mainly due to police stopping cars during COVID-19. We hope this rise in recorded cases has been matched by the right wrap-around support and advocacy offer for victims of child trafficking.

One of our projects has seen a rise in missing reports from parents, where the parents fear being fined but feel unable to keep their children in.

10. Unregulated accommodation

We have asked the Welsh Government to promote the active offer of advocacy to all care-experienced children and young people living in unregulated accommodation. We fear that this could be a blind spot for the Welsh Government and stretched local authorities at the moment, and ensuring advocate contact would help to reduce risks and empower those children and young people. This could be an interim measure during the pandemic, although we would encourage an active offer longer term if unregulated accommodation continues to be used. Welsh Government, local authorities and third sector partners are looking at the issue of unregulated accommodation within the residential task and finish group which NYAS Cymru sits on.

11. No decisions about young people, without young people

Co-production with care-experienced children and young people should always be part of the approach to policies and guidance that will affect their lives. NYAS Cymru and our colleagues in the sector are able to support and facilitate this.

Our youth participation work continues, with groups operating across Wales keeping in contact virtually. The current pandemic must not get in the way of a child's right to be listened to and taken seriously, as enshrined in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Children and young people being part of decisions made about them is still fundamentally critical during this time, and must be central to their care plans and the recovery model after COVID-19.

12. Direct quotes from care-experienced children and young people

12a. What are your concerns about technology and getting online?"

"I have no Wi-Fi and when it does work it cuts out."

"I don't have many friends as I have just moved to a new house when all this began. I live in the middle or nowhere and there's no service or anything."

"People need to keep in touch, they need internet access, laptops, top-ups for their phone, so they can contact friends, family or others. Otherwise it would be bad for my mental health."

"Internet is key so that I can learn something new and educational at this time. It is important to keep up social interaction on Instagram, Zoom, Facebook Messenger. As well as this I need to keep my mind occupied, puzzles, games and watching DVD's help".

"Wi-Fi is what is important, and a phone or laptop or tablet. I need to keep busy."

"Lack of [digital] access could add to or bring back demons, sitting in the same walls can be so detrimental to your mental health."

12b. "Is there anything that you are struggling with or finding difficult during the lockdown?"

"Going to the shops is difficult, being pregnant and now that I have split up with my partner. I could not get a taxi until recently due to the lockdown. I struggle with not being able to see much of people."

- 22 year old young woman, living in independent accommodation

"Managing mental health and delays with benefits."

- 20 year old young man, living in independent accommodation

"Not seeing my mum as all face to face visits have stopped."

- 12 year old boy, living in a residential children's home

“Staying in my bedroom all day, I don’t have a routine to keep me afloat. I feel like I’ve lost myself. I don’t sleep eat; I have no friends to talk to. In education I was able to see some friends but it’s not the same.”

- *16 year old girl, living with foster carers*

12c. “Is there anything that you are enjoying or think is working well during the lockdown?”

“I think that everyone is keeping in contact with everyone, so nobody is feeling alone, and I think that it is good to see that the majority of the public are following the lockdown rules.”

- *17 year old girl, living with foster carers*

“I like the staff playing with us and the weather being good.”

- *10 year old boy living in a residential children’s home*

“No homework, playing with my brothers spending time with family.”

- *10 year old girl, living with foster carers*

“I have been doing colouring books and cooking new things which I am enjoying.”

- *25 year old young woman, living in independent accommodation*