



UNITY | UNDDOD

EMPOWERING YOUNG WOMEN
AND PROMOTING EQUALITY
GRYMUSO MENYWOD IFANC
A HYRWYDDO CYDRADDOLDEB

Mid-term Review



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Our thanks to the many busy professionals from children's services, health and third sector organisations who gave their time and shared their views on the project and finally and most importantly a big thank you to the young women who agreed to be interviewed especially given the impact of the Pandemic and the restrictions imposed to curb the spread of the virus over the course of the fieldwork.

The research findings pay testament to the commitment of the Project Unity team in working with care experienced young women as they struggle to overcome their difficulties and retain or resume care of their children. It also highlights the strengths of a young person-led service and the capabilities and difficult circumstances of many care experienced young women who are mothers or expectant mothers.



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Introduction

by Sharon Lovell MBE, CEO NYAS Cymru

This report is an overview of the evaluation achieved by NYAS Cymru on the mid-way review of our Project Unity Programme funded by Welsh Government through the Social Service Sustainability Grant.

We have an ambitious plan; to provide intensive support to young women in care who are either pregnant or have children at risk of also entering the care system.

Our aim was to keep families together; to break the cycle of children going into care and uphold the rights and entitlements of young women and their children. Alongside this we wanted to create peer support networks for young women who are often isolated, in fear, scared and confused by the systems around them. We want to address the inequalities of gender and campaign on the issues affecting young women in Wales.

The idea of the Unity Project was born from the increasing advocacy cases we were asked to support for young women who were often in crisis.

The findings in this paper are a reflection on the formation of a new approach to working with young women, without judgement and with someone on their side. This mid-way review evidences the need for the ongoing project to continue; lessons learnt and how we can implement these as we move onto the next phase which will include working with young men to address the issues they face in parenting and relationships.

The work of Project Unity has been acknowledged as a pioneering piece of work in social care across Wales. NYAS Cymru have been finalists in the Children and Young People Now Awards, Youth Work Excellence Awards and European Social Care Awards for innovation.

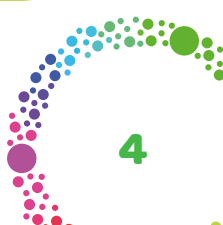


The voices of young women are enshrined in this report;

I would like to thank every one of them for taking the time to speak to us about their experiences of Project Unity.

I promise – we will always be on your side. I would also like to thank Dr Anne Crowley for undertaking this research of Project Unity and all the local authority staff who gave interviews along with the staff in NYAS Cymru who make the difference to the lives of young women every day.

I am also thankful to Welsh Government for supporting the continuation of funding for Project Unity throughout Wales. Our ambition remains high; we will continue to provide the intensive wrap around support for young women, create peer support networks, campaign on gender equality issues and aim to create systemic change which reflect a safe, fairer, equitable system for children and their care experienced mothers.



- 1.1** 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 three-year Sustainable Social Services Third Sector Grant (SSG). NYAS Cymru commissioned a mid-term review and evaluation of the first 18 months of this grant to identify the outputs that have been delivered, the outcomes for service users, what has been working well and not so well and the learning for the next 18 months and beyond. This report sets out the findings of this mid-term Review.
- 1.2** Care experienced young women are more likely than the general population to be young parents¹. Research on what happens after young people become parents indicates that while early parenthood can be a positive experience, parenting experience can be negatively impacted by the impact of previous trauma, stigma, accommodation challenges, mental health difficulties, experiences of poverty and an absence of informal support². Some parents cope well despite these adversities but there is an emerging evidence base to suggest that care experienced young parents are more likely to experience state intervention and/or separation from their children.
- 1.3** Project Unity provides wraparound intensive support for young and expectant mothers who have care experience. The project aims to break the cycle whereby children of care-experienced mothers are taken into care or become subject to child protection processes, thereby reducing the numbers of children entering care in Wales and improve individual and family well-being. Young women are supported to overcome the challenges they face as a result of poverty, ill health, inequality, discrimination and social isolation. Ultimately, the aspiration is that the Unity Project will make the following difference or impact:
- Drive and support a reduction in numbers of children entering care in Wales and reduced involvement with the child protection system;
 - Ensure that care-experienced young mothers and expectant mothers are empowered to have their voice heard and can influence policy and practice which impacts on this marginalised group;
 - Improve the wellbeing of care-experienced mothers, expectant mothers and children in Wales;
 - Address a diverse range of inequalities experienced by care-experienced young women, including poverty, homelessness, health and mental health, employability and educational attainment;
 - Provide cost savings to local authorities by reducing demand on their services and preventing escalation of child protection proceedings.
- 1.4** Previous research³ and the evaluation of the Project Unity pilot illustrated that what care experienced mothers or expectant mothers really want and need was holistic, intensive support from someone who responded to their priorities and acted on their wishes, someone they could trust and believe was 'on their side' when navigating care and protection proceedings as parents. These proceedings are usually complex, with numerous stages taking place within strict deadlines. There are many different parties and often strained relationships⁴. The support from Project Unity is designed to facilitate young mothers and expectant mother's engagement in child protection processes or care proceedings in order for them to at least, have a chance - of achieving their parenting goals.
- 1.5** Project Unity thus aims to provide intensive person-centred support to young women which:
- Takes a trauma-informed approach to overcome barriers to positive engagement with services.
 - Reduces loneliness/isolation by integrating women into local community activities and peer/participation groups.
 - Enables young women to access training/education and employment opportunities.
 - Provides advice and assistance on managing benefits and budgets, healthy relationships, wellbeing, signposting to other agencies for specialist support, e.g., counselling.
 - Provides support/representation to navigate systems in which they find themselves.

¹ Roberts, L., Maxwell, N., Elliot, M. (2019) *When young people in and leaving state care become parents. What happens and why?* In Children and Youth Services Review Volume 104

² Ibid

³ Roberts, L. 2017. *A small-scale qualitative scoping study into the experiences of looked after children and care leavers who are parents in Wales*. Child & Family Social Work 22(3), pp. 1274-1282.

⁴ Broadhurst, K. et al. (2015) *Vulnerable birth mothers and repeat losses of infants to public care: is targeted reproductive health care ethically defensible?* Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law. 37, 1, p. 84-98. 15 p.

SECTION 1 Introduction and background

1.6 Each support plan is led by the young woman; using a detailed holistic assessment template to help understand her needs and priorities. Young women set their own goals and determine the level of intervention and support they require. The vision is that peer networks across the local areas build complementary social support and provide a platform for launching campaigns to influence systematic change. The project also aimed to deliver annual conferences on Gender Equality. Conference plans have had to be temporarily shelved because of the public health restrictions in place in 2020 and 2021.

1.7 Outcomes for parents in or leaving care

1.7.1 Unfortunately the official statistics produced by the Welsh Government do not include details on the numbers or outcomes of parents in and leaving care⁵ and we therefore have no data available on trends with regard to the outcomes for children of care experienced young parents. We do know from the official statistics that the numbers of children looked after in Wales increased by 22% between 2014 and 2019. Those aged 10-15 make up the largest proportion of children looked after over this period and whilst all age groups have seen a rise over the five years, the biggest increase has been in the rate of under-1s (37%)⁶.

1.7.2 The world changed in the spring of 2020, and it will be challenging to determine the exact impact of the Pandemic on these figures⁷ or indeed the broader impact on young women, pregnant during this time. Thus, the limitations of published statistics on the circumstances of children entering care and the extraordinary times we are living through make it particularly difficult to understand the impact of Project Unity on the outcomes for children born of young parents in care or in the process of leaving care (including their living arrangements).

1.7.3 In the absence of official statistics we are reliant on individual studies to evidence outcomes for parents in and leaving care. Roberts (2021) concludes that, *Considered cumulatively, individual studies from within and outside of the UK consistently provide evidence of increased vulnerability of care-experienced parents*

and their risk of poorer outcomes with respect to parenting (p.43)⁸. One study conducted by Roberts and others at CASCADE, Cardiff University offers a snapshot of the young parenting population in and leaving care in Wales, their needs (as identified by social care professionals) and outcomes⁹. The study surveyed local authority leaving care teams in Wales over a 12-month period in 2016-17 to collect information on the statutory support provided to parents under 21 while in care or in the process of leaving care. Details of pregnancies and births were requested and the survey sought information on outcomes for children including their living arrangements and whether children were subject to legal orders or in receipt of any local authority support.

1.7.4 Twenty out of twenty-two local authorities in Wales responded to this survey. 258 parents (aged 16-21) were identified by leaving care teams with 238 children and 44 on-going pregnancies. 74% of children were living with at least one biological parent. Around one in four children (26 per cent) were separated from both parents at the time of data collection; 10 per cent of children were in the care of local authority carers, 9 per cent with adoptive carers and a further 7 per cent living with friends and family. Children separated from mothers were most likely to be living with local authority carers and adoptive parents. Children separated from fathers were most likely to be living with the biological mother followed by local authority and friends/ family carers. Moreover, for children living with a care-experienced parent, around one in three (34 per cent) were in receipt of some form of statutory intervention.

1.8 The Needs of care experienced young mothers

1.8.1 The CASCADE survey also asked the leaving care teams for information on the ongoing, recorded needs - in relation to parenting as well as the individual needs of each of the young parents. The most cited need for parents (males and females) were difficulties with families and relationships. For females this was followed by mental health, housing, financial and budgeting and education, employment and training.

⁵ Welsh Government. [Children looked after by local authorities 2020-21](#)

⁶ Hodges, H. (2020) [Children Looked After in Wales](#). Cardiff: Wales Centre for Public Policy

⁷ Welsh Government. [Children looked after by local authorities 2020-21](#)

⁸ Roberts, L. (2021). [The children of looked after children: outcomes, experiences and ensuring meaningful support to young parents in and leaving care](#). Bristol: Policy Press

⁹ Ibid

SECTION 1 Introduction and background

1.8.2 These needs are reflected in Project Unity's target group as evidenced in the evaluation of the pilot project in 2020 and continue to inform the roll out of Project Unity across Wales¹⁰.

1.9 Policy context

1.9.1 The fifth Welsh Government (2016-2021) established a programme to 'Improve Outcomes for Children' overseen by a [Ministerial Advisory Group](#) (MAG) the programme focused on exploring a number of relevant policy areas including: safely reducing the number of children in need of care; making sure there are sufficient placement options of a high quality for children who are looked after or are leaving care; and supporting children who are looked after to have the best possible journeys through care and into adulthood. This programme responded to concerns from both the family justice sector and the children's social care sector that the care system is under unsustainable pressure, emphasising the growing number of families facing the stresses of poverty and the need to help people at early stages of family difficulties to prevent problems getting worse and to support children and those caring for them. The [Care Crisis Review](#), published in June 2018, confirmed the

sense of crisis that is now felt by many young people, families and those working within the system because of increased use of court proceedings.

1.9.2 In 2019 as trends in the numbers of children entering care continued up (34% in 15 years), Welsh Government agreed targets or 'reduction expectations' with 16 of the 22 local authorities in Wales¹¹. Looking forward, the new (sixth) Welsh Government announced in its Programme of government commitments to: a) explore radical reform of current services for children looked after and care leavers and b) prevent families breaking up by funding advocacy services for parents whose children are at risk of coming into care¹².

1.9.3 The learning from this mid-term review in terms of the implications for policy and practice around reducing the number of children of care experienced mothers who enter care, the provision of parent advocacy and the role of corporate parents could usefully inform the Children's Oversight Board that Welsh Government have established, to take forward these Programme of government commitments over the next five years.

¹⁰ Crowley, A. (2020) *Review and Evaluation of Project Unity (Phase 1) – Learning for Phase 2*

¹¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-politics-48844075>

¹² Welsh Government (updated December 2021) [Programme of government 2021-2026](#)



SECTION 2 Research design and methodology

- 2.1** This is a mid-point review of the setting up of a new all-Wales project, and as such the research design explored the organisation, implementation and delivery of Project Unity as well as the outputs and outcomes for services users. It is important to reflect on and learn from the experiences of those delivering services along with the experiences of those in receipt of support. Choices regarding data collection methods were informed by an evaluation of the pilot for Project Unity operating in south Wales from 2017-2020 and the learning regarding possible data sources and the most efficient collection methods.
- 2.2** The review set out to address the following questions (as set out in the Project Unity Work Plan):
- How much the project has delivered?
 - How well the project has delivered?
 - What difference the project has made?
- 2.3** In November 2021 data was extracted from Project Unity's case record system (PRISM) to review the:
- Numbers, characteristics and circumstances of service users and the nature of support provided by Project Unity;
 - Outcomes/impact on individual young women and their circumstances including project worker/young people assessments and distance travelled assessments completed by service users.
- 2.4** In preparing for this analysis the distance travelled assessments were collated by the service manager who reported that the sample comprised 60 service users who had completed at least two assessments. This represents around half of all cases opened through 2020 and 2021.
- 2.5** From October – December 2021, 30 semi-structured interviews were undertaken with service users, project workers and managers, and external agencies. Nine young women were interviewed, 10 NYAS Cymru staff and managers and 11 external. The interviews explored the difference Project Unity is making for the young women and the perceived quality of the Project Unity service as understood by all of the different stakeholders, exploring what is seen to be working particularly well and not so well and captured any suggestions for improvements.
- 2.6** Information from these sources has been analysed thematically and issues for attention identified. Recommendations for action are put forward in Section 4 of this report for NYAS Cymru to consider at an action planning workshop scheduled for January 2022.



SECTION 3 Findings

3.1 Project delivery

- 3.1.1 NYAS Cymru's Sustainable Social Services Third Sector Grant for Project Unity started in April 2020 just as the Pandemic hit our shores and the first national lockdown was imposed. The transition from the pilot phase of Project Unity operating primarily in south Wales to a wider, all-Wales, service funded under this new grant was made much more challenging by the fact that all work had to be done from a distance, using remote tools including WhatsApp and Teams. Remote working made it challenging for Project Unity to engage with vulnerable young women on the one hand and also to promote the service to front line workers working in local authorities, health care teams and third sector organisations – many of whom were working from home. It also necessitated some adaptations of the Project Unity service model in order to prioritise the changing needs of young women as they were impacted by the public health restrictions.
- 3.1.2 Timely negotiations with the Welsh Government in the first quarter of the grant period enabled NYAS Cymru to re-direct some of the grant award to provide additional, unplanned for support to young care experienced mothers and expectant mothers in response to needs associated with the public health restrictions. The project noted a greater need for young mothers to access emergency financial support for basic items such as food, healthcare products, safeguarding equipment (often a requirement in regard to care and support plans) and travel costs (for example, when attending contact or essential appointments).
- 3.1.3 A lack of digital resources, broadband capabilities and the costs of data proved to be barriers for young women in terms of connecting with services and taking part in meetings regarding concerns about their parenting. NYAS Cymru responded to these additional needs by using some of the grant to provide equipment, data and broadband upgrades, Baby Boxes - containing essential items, food vouchers and travel passes.
- 3.1.4 The roll-out of the project to the whole of Wales has inevitably been frustrated by the COVID restrictions. Recruiting staff has been challenging and it has taken longer than anticipated to build up the project team. The roll-out has been managed in stages. The project was already operational in the Pan-Gwent local authorities where a pilot project ran from 2017-2020. Services have been rolled out to other parts of Wales as staff have been recruited - first to North Wales where the co-ordinator is based and then on to Cardiff

and the Vale of Glamorgan, Rhondda Cynon Taff and Merthyr Tydfil. Subsequently and most recently as another project worker has been recruited, on to Swansea and Neath Port Talbot in December 2021. Plans are now underway to recruit another project worker to cover Pembrokeshire, Ceredigion and Carmarthenshire.

Promoting the new service

- 3.1.5 The promotion of the service is led by Project Unity's service manager; she and the co-ordinator regularly give presentations to post-16 teams and other children's services teams. More recently the service manager has targeted health care professionals who have contact with young women who might benefit from the service such as midwives and health visitors. The service manager supported by the co-ordinator liaises with commissioners and senior managers in local authorities to promote the service or to take up operational issues. Presentations have been given to two of the six regional safeguarding boards in Wales to disseminate information about the new service.
- 3.1.6 The project became operational in 2020 during protracted national lockdowns. With many public sector staff working from home there were few face-to-face meetings or training events, it has been much harder in these circumstances to 'spread the word' about the new Project Unity services amongst frontline workers who are in contact with eligible young women – such as workers in local authority post-16 teams, social workers, midwives and health visitors, youth workers, drug and alcohol and housing and mental health agencies,
- 3.1.7 Every member of the team spoke of these difficulties. One described the challenges very clearly:

Getting people on board virtually is much more difficult. When you are visiting people's offices and chatting in the corridor you can follow up on interest, answer queries and develop trusting, professional relationships with frontline workers... virtually they say they will do it tomorrow but they don't and we try and chase. During the lockdowns it was clear that some frontline workers are really struggling working from home with home-schooling etc.

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- 3.1.8 The feedback from external agencies also indicated that the working arrangements during the Pandemic had made it harder for front line agencies to learn about Project Unity. One social worker who had made referrals to Project Unity said:

I'm not sure if everyone knows about it though. We are all working from home and its hard 'spreading the word' in these circumstances and everyone is so busy.

On a positive note, the social worker added:

...but advocacy is getting more popular to ensure parents understand the court process – we are using it in more and more cases.

- 3.1.9 Project Unity staff all spoke of the particular difficulties they experienced in getting referrals from local authority areas where NYAS Cymru was less well known – these are areas where a different provider is contracted to deliver statutory advocacy services to children in the care system. One of the project workers said:

When [statutory] advocacy is run by another organisation it can be a struggle to get referrals. More are coming our way now via TGP (another main service provider) and we get referrals from some generic advocacy services but referrers often get a bit confused.... We have just got to keep promoting the service and eventually 'word of mouth' will do it,

- 3.1.10 In these same areas in particular, project workers also talked of the frustration of referrals coming in too late – when the Public Law Outline (PLO) process had already been commenced. One project worker described that PLO point in proceedings, as the end of game, by then it's really too late to have a chance whereas, in cases where the referral came to Project Unity early in the pregnancy there was more time and opportunity to work constructively. Service managers are working to encourage local authorities to refer young women earlier that is when child protection concerns are first identified.

Recruitment and training of staff

- 3.1.11 COVID restrictions have also brought challenges to recruitment. Five project workers and a service manager have been recruited and inducted over the past 18 months. The co-ordinator was already in post. The process was seen positively by all of the staff and appointing managers. All project workers spoke highly of the support they received both from the co-ordinator and the service manager. One project worker said: 'they are just brilliant. They always return calls and do what they say they will do! Nothing is too much trouble'.

Another said:

NYAS have been fab – not easy during COVID. We have a weekly coffee morning on Teams.

- 3.1.12 Whilst all the Unity team spoke highly of the training they had received, some additional training needs were identified by team members including healthy relationships and trauma informed practice. One team member was disappointed that the NYAS training was too 'London-centric' and didn't always reflect the policy context in Wales. One of the project workers has recently completed the accredited NYAS training on peer mentoring and has taken the lead in the team on supporting more young women to become peer mentors.

Staffing structure

- 3.1.13 As the project has rolled out, lessons have been learnt and the staffing structure has been adapted to locate project workers regionally, to cover the six regions of Wales¹³. This will allow project workers more opportunities to build direct relationships with referrers (existing and potential) in a given area and thereby strengthen the referral pathways. The team has now been established. A service manager joined the project co-ordinator in November 2020 and by the end of 2021, four project workers were in post and recruitment underway for another.
- 3.1.14 This staffing structure is said to be working well – enabling the delivery of support for the project workers who are working in some very stressful situations. This has been made harder by the Pandemic but managers within NYAS Cymru have built in extra support for the well-being of staff working from home with weekly video coffee mornings and weekly supervision sessions as a minimum.

¹³ The six regions that NYAS Cymru are using to locate Project Unity project workers broadly follow the existing commissioning arrangements for statutory advocacy for children and young people, that is: North Wales; Pan-Gwent; Cardiff and the Vale; Cwm Taf; Swansea and Neath Port Talbot; and Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion, Pembrokeshire and Powys.

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3.1.15 The project workers all report to the co-ordinator with support from the service manager. Links with agencies, promotion and co-ordination of the service is managed by the co-ordinator and service manager alongside preparing monitoring reports and strategic planning (with NYAS Cymru's operations manager, chief executive and other service managers). Senior managers commented in interview on how the 'energy' of the service manager role really works well to develop, maximise and manage the interfaces between the new project - Project Unity - and front-line services.

Case management – referrals, assessment and support plans

3.1.16 The referral system seems to be working well according to those who have referred and the project team. Referrers were pleased to note how promptly Project Unity made contact with the young woman they had referred and how easy the referral process was. This comment from a family support worker from Caerphilly illustrates these points:

Yes [the referral process] worked well, I think. The social worker did the referral. I went on a home visit with the Unity worker and we have met since to plan support...the referral pathways are working well. They don't seem to have a waiting list and they responded very quickly. Nice to see these days – most services that we try to refer to have waiting lists.

3.1.17 Another referrer, this time from a post-16 team, commented on how good the Unity worker was in engaging a young person and how the support provided by Unity helped her to manage the demands on her time:

I referred a young lady who was pregnant with lots of issues. I heard about Project Unity from a social worker who suggested it and then I did a referral. This young lady would not engage with social services but she did engage with me and I was doing everything. A lot of support was needed so it was a huge relief (for her and me!) to get Project Unity involved.

3.1.18 There have been a few teething problems with the referral systems which have now been addressed. The generic NYAS online referral form was confusing for referrers and it has now been replaced on the NYAS Cymru website by a bespoke referral form for Project Unity. The form is brief and only asks for sufficient information to enable a risk assessment for the project worker to make initial contact with the young person. Referrals are also taken by phone or email and Project Unity staff have reached out to agencies to make the referral process as easy as possible. Their efforts recognise the pressures on frontline workers who find it challenging to find the time to fill in detailed referral forms. The feedback from external agencies who have referred to Project Unity on the referral process and on joint working is very positive.

3.1.19 After checking with the young person that they know about the referral and are happy to be contacted, the allocated project worker will conduct an assessment with the young person about their situation and the support that they want from Project Unity. A support plan is drawn up and agreed. The support plan is reviewed at least monthly through supervision sessions with the co-ordinator and a more formal review is conducted at three-monthly intervals. The project is mindful of ensuring that the service is targeted on issues that it can help the young woman with and on finding sustainable ways of integrating the young woman into local community support networks and services. The young woman is at the centre of this assessment and planning process but some project workers noted that it can be challenging to co-produce assessments and support plans on-line rather than face-to-face.

3.1.20 All three of the project workers in post when the fieldwork was completed seemed unsure about the three-month review procedure. All commented on how they did periodic case reviews these were not seen as framed by a timeline. One of the managers explained the purpose of these periodic case reviews:

We ask the project worker - shall we keep the case open? We don't want the young women becoming too dependent on us. We sometimes 'freeze' cases and arrange to make contact in six weeks initially, then eight weeks, etc. We do ensure we have in depth conversations with project workers on each young person on a regular basis.

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The manager went on to report that when a case is still open after six months and proceedings are concluded, they will encourage the project workers to talk to the young person specifically about winding down their involvement.

Recording and monitoring

- 3.1.21 The Prism case management system was seen as OK by all the team, although some technical hitches were acknowledged. The service manager reported that the system was delivering regular management information reports that were shared with the team and informed reflections on how the project was developing.
- 3.1.22 In order to measure distance travelled on soft outcomes such as increases in confidence and improvements in well-being, the young women using the service are asked to complete a questionnaire at the beginning, and to repeat that during their engagement with Project Unity and then again, at the end.
- 3.1.23 The distance travelled tool is seen by project workers as user friendly, and 'nice and simple' but they all said that the 'middle' and 'end' assessment points can be hard to plan for. One project worker explained,

it's hard to get the final feedback because endings are unpredictable and things have changed. You don't get much more than - thanks for everything, we're doing OK now.

Another said,

sometimes events overtake the process and it's hard to judge when the middle actually is.

All staff said that it was much easier to complete the assessments face-to-face than online or on the phone and reported that because that was not possible for much of the last year getting young women engaged in follow up self-assessments could be challenging.

Mapping local services

- 3.1.24 As project workers have become more focused on particular regions in Wales they have been able to map local services and with the support of the service manager, produce directories of services in their area that may be relevant to the young mothers with whom they work. Initially a directory was produced for the

pan-Gwent area, now they are available in all four of the regions where Project Unity was actively working at the time of this mid-term review. Directories for the other two regions will be produced when newly recruited project workers are operational. All the staff team were positive about these resources and indicated that the directories are being continually updated and kept under review. Currently the directories are used by the project team as internal documents.

Peer support networks

- 3.1.25 The package of services provided by Project Unity continues to evolve and adapt in response to the desires and needs of the young women who use the project and of the course of the public health restrictions in place in Wales. Project staff and all of the young women interviewed placed the intensive one to one support as the centrepiece of the service model and the most helpful element. Staff and some of the young women spoke highly of the peer cafés that have been developed in recent months – initially online and more recently face-to-face. The vision is for Project Unity to work with partners and build a number of peer support networks across Wales where young women can support each other, advocate for change and benefit from group inputs such as mindfulness training, and healthy eating advice. However, the restrictions on social contact have provided real challenges to getting the peer support networks up and running. A monthly peer cafe has been run for the past six months on-line and one face-to-face meeting took place in Caerphilly in late October 2021 shortly before the fourth wave of the Pandemic hit Wales.
- 3.1.26 Plans are still in place to train young women as peer advocates and mentors for other young people. One young woman has commenced NYAS' accredited training programme (for peer mentors) and others are being encouraged to do so.

Influencing and campaigning

- 3.1.27 The influencing and campaigning aspect of the service model is still in its early stages as it is intended to be led by service users and grow through the peer support networks. To date the service manager has made good links with a number of organisations to explore joint influencing work including Barnardo's, Plan UK, MIND Cymru, Voices from Care, Welsh Women's Aid and the CASCADE research centre in Cardiff University. NYAS Cymru have worked with CASCADE's Dr Louise Roberts and Rachael Vaughan

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on developing a best practice Charter on supporting parents in and leaving care which was launched in September 2021. Local authorities in England and Wales have been invited to sign up to the charter. Compliance with the best practice charter would address some of the biggest grievances of young women with

whom Project Unity works and provides a useful advocacy tool for joint, campaigning and influencing work. Project Unity are currently working with NYAS' campaigns team on shaping a campaign to be launched in January 2022 focused on challenging the discrimination young care experienced mothers face.

3.2 Outputs

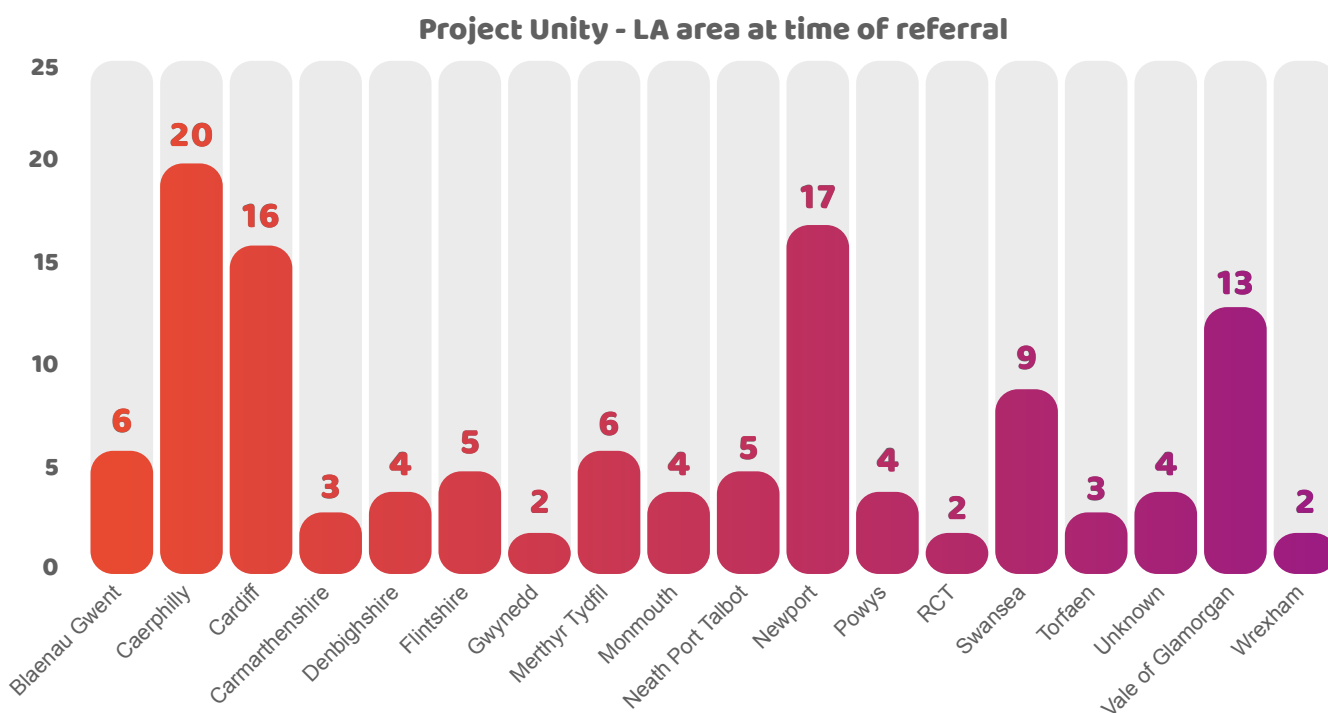
How many young women have benefited from the service?

- 3.2.1 A review of the case records of Project Unity identified 125 cases opened over the period 1st April 2020 - 10th November 2021. The first recorded case was opened on the 15th April 2020. The Project was able to become operational in some parts of Wales almost immediately as the project co-ordinator was already in post. The roll out across other parts of Wales has been staged as the recruitment and induction of project workers progressed.
- 3.2.2 The length of time young women were engaged with Project Unity was difficult to determine from the data provided. Six of the cases (around 5%) failed to engage and of the remaining cases it is estimated that the average length of time cases were open was 6-12 months with timings dependant on how long child protection processes take to conclude.

Where are they from?

- 3.2.3 Where recorded (n=122), the **young women lived in one of 19 local authorities across Wales** as set out in Chart 1. Two of the three local authorities not yet represented are in west Wales (Pembrokeshire, Ceredigion) where the deployment of the last regionally based project worker is due to take place early in 2022. Conwy is the other local authority who has yet to use the service and work will need to continue there to encourage referrals. The project has successfully engaged with 11 new local authorities since July 2020¹⁴ but Chart 1 indicates that some more targeted promotion of Project Unity is required in some of these local authority areas, notably Carmarthenshire, Gwynedd, Rhondda Cynon Taff, Torfaen and Wrexham.

Chart 1: Numbers of cases by local authority



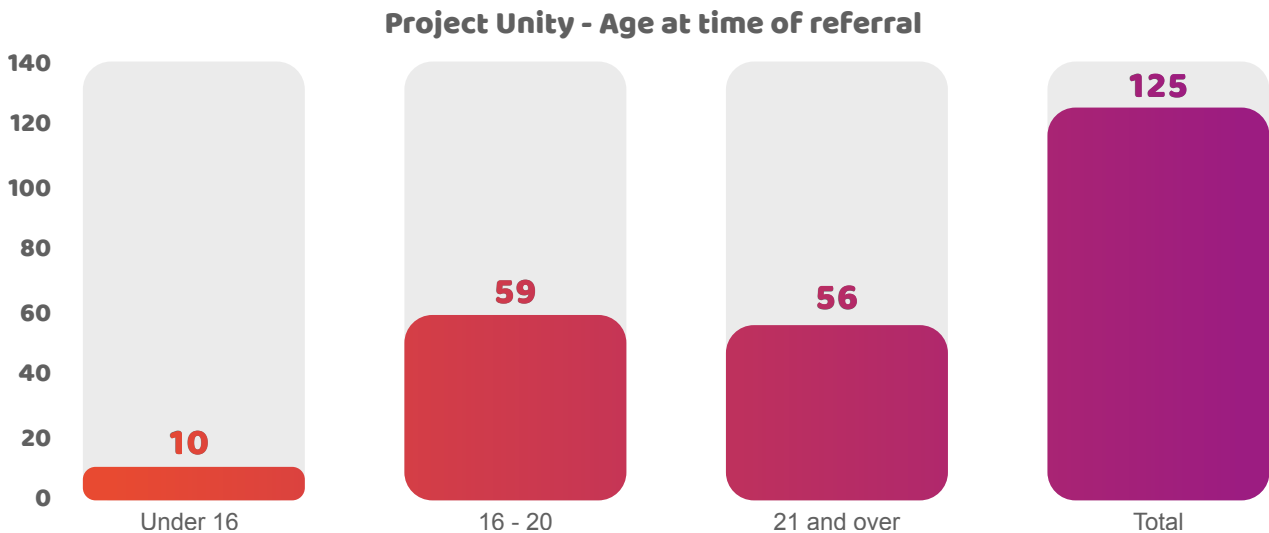
¹⁴ Using the findings of the Review and Evaluation of Project Unity (Phase 1) – Learning for Phase 2 as a baseline.

SECTION 3 Findings

Age

3.2.4 All of the **125 cases** were care experienced young women, some were still living in care placements but most had moved on to live independently some time ago. Chart 2 shows the age profile of the young women. Around **8% were under 16** when they were referred to Project Unity, the majority of young women are divided across the 16-20 and 21-24 age categories fairly evenly (47% and 45% respectively).

Chart 2: **Age at time of referral**



SECTION 3 Findings

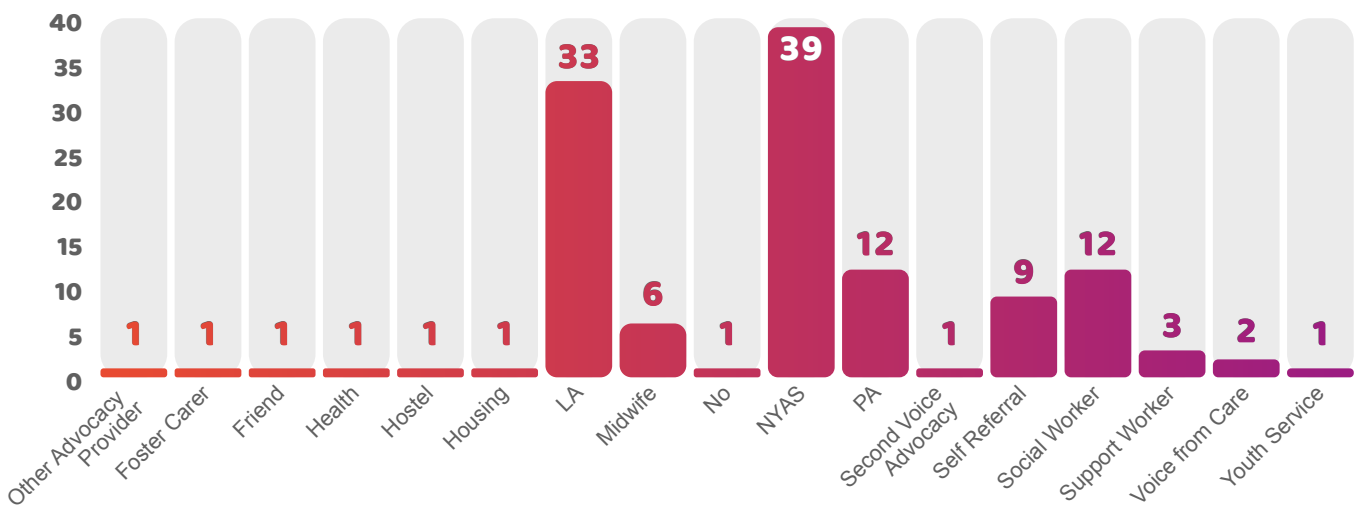
Referrals

3.2.5 The majority of cases were opened in 2021 (**83% of the total**) with the other **22 cases opened between 15th April – 31st December 2020**. This trend shows the impact of the public health restrictions for much of 2020 and early 2021 in response to the COVID Pandemic which as previously noted caused delays and necessitated adaptations with regard to service delivery and staff recruitment and training. In the last 6 months of 2021, Project Unity averaged **10-11 referrals per month**.

3.2.6 Details of the referral agency were not obviously categorised in the case record but Chart 3 illustrates that the majority of referrals came from local authority children’s services including Leaving care/Post-16 teams (**45%**) or from other NYAS Cymru services (**31%**) – particularly their parent advocacy and statutory advocacy services. Seven percent of cases were self-referrals – a decline since the pilot project was evaluated in August 2020 (where the figure was 18%). We can only speculate but self-referral is likely to have been even more difficult to promote amongst young women during lockdowns. Referral pathways across the NYAS Cymru advocacy services are seen to be working very well with Project Unity’s clear eligibility criteria of age and care status. The respective advocacy services are however flexible in their approach depending on the young person’s wishes.

Chart 3: Referrals

Project Unity - Source of referral

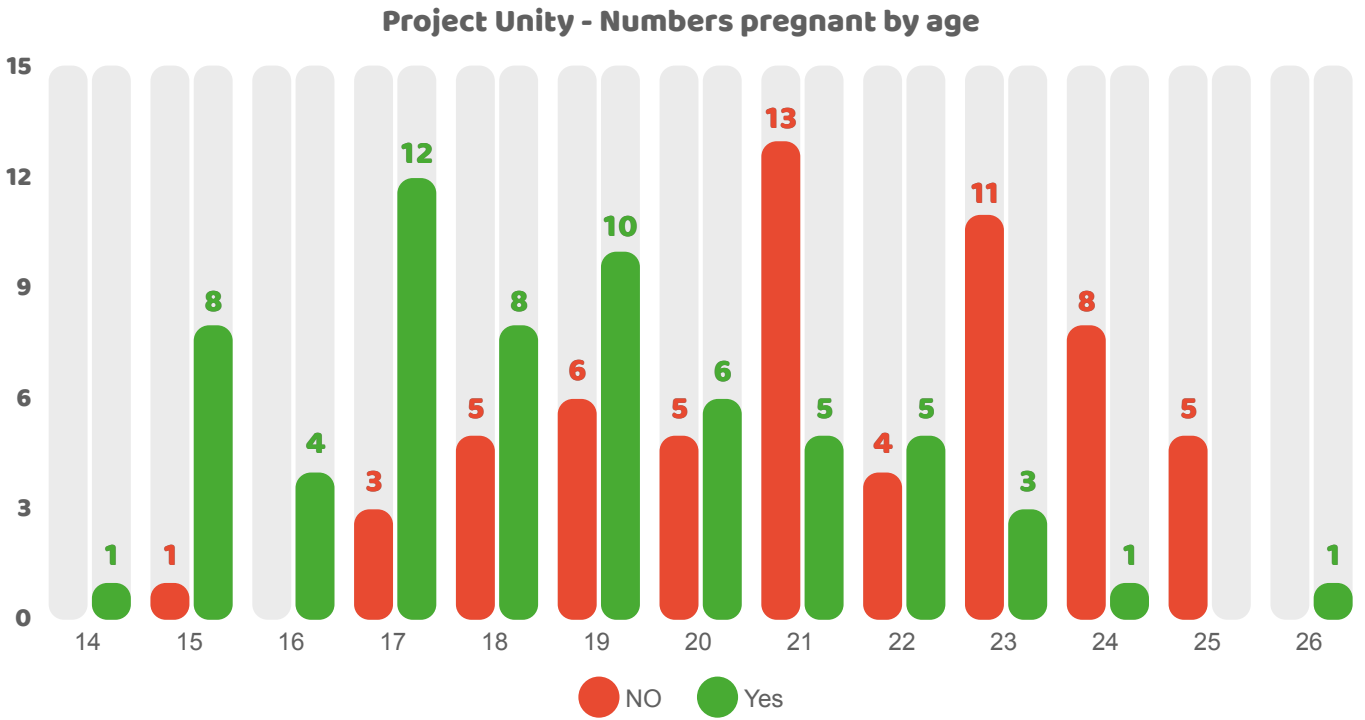


SECTION 3 Findings

Pregnant or already a parent

3.2.7 Around half of the 125 young women were pregnant when the case was opened – 49%, the remaining 51% already had at least one child. Chart 4 below illustrates that those young women who engaged with the project before the age of 21 were more likely to be pregnant.

Chart 4: Pregnant at time of referral by age



SECTION 3 Findings

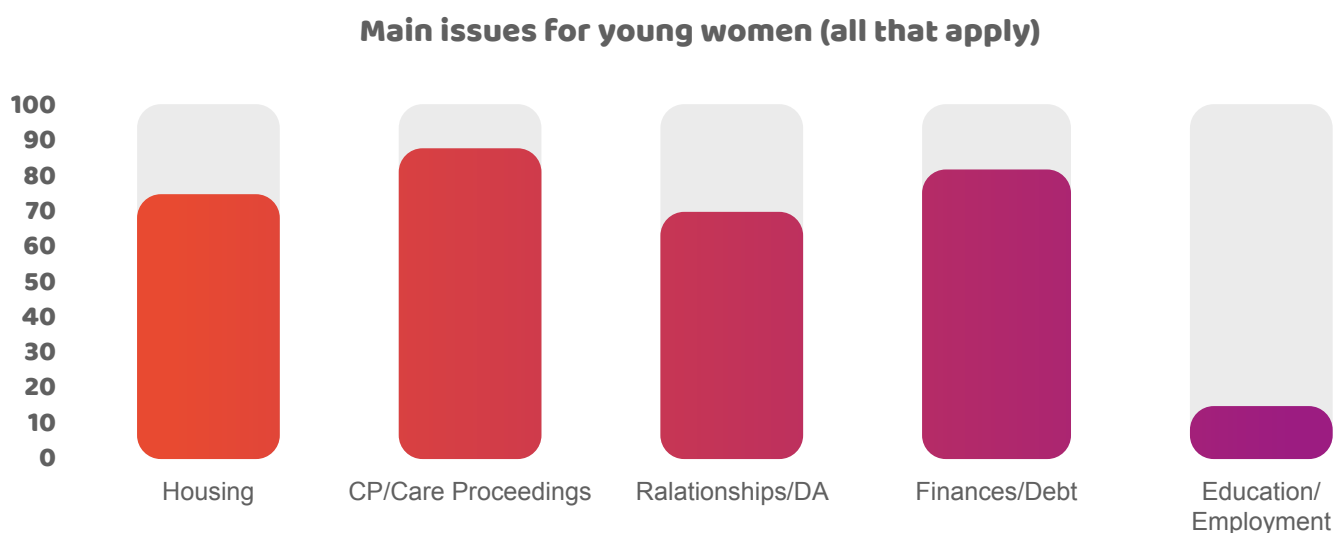
The issues young women wanted help and support with

3.2.8 The interviews with staff, referrers, and young women identified the five most common issues that young women wanted help with, as:

- Engagement with the child protection investigation/care proceedings - helping young women to understand what was expected of them and to participate in the proceedings and support with parenting assessments.
- Finances: dealing with debts, managing on a low income, accessing grants.
- Housing: getting somewhere to live, setting up a home.
- Domestic abuse and unhealthy relationships with partners, ex-partners and family members.

3.2.9 These issues were also reflected in the case records as illustrated in the analysis in Chart 5.

Chart 5: Numbers of young women requesting support with the most common issues



3.2.10 Both the review of the case records and the interviews with the project team and service users illustrated how the young women are requesting support on a number of issues simultaneously. Emotional support or support with mental health was an issue for all service users, but **67%** also had issues with finances – they wanted help budgeting and managing on a low income, **61%** had issues around housing – they needed help getting somewhere to live, or help setting up a safe home for them and their baby, child or children. Other issues that young women presented included domestic abuse/unhealthy relationships and drug and alcohol misuse.

3.2.11 In more than 7 out of 10 cases, young women were requesting **help to navigate child protection or care proceedings** and for those who were pregnant, prepare for baby's arrival under the watchful eye of

children's services. One project worker noted that in her experience any care experienced expectant mother under the age of 17 was investigated because of child protection concerns. Another project worker explained how the young women she supports feel that they are under scrutiny and can't ask social services for help for fear of being dismissed as 'not a good enough' parent:

Young people don't want to ask for help but they really need it. They are worried that they will be penalised for asking and have to jump through many hoops. Sometimes they are really between a rock and a hard place. They are under the microscope all the time.

SECTION 3 Findings

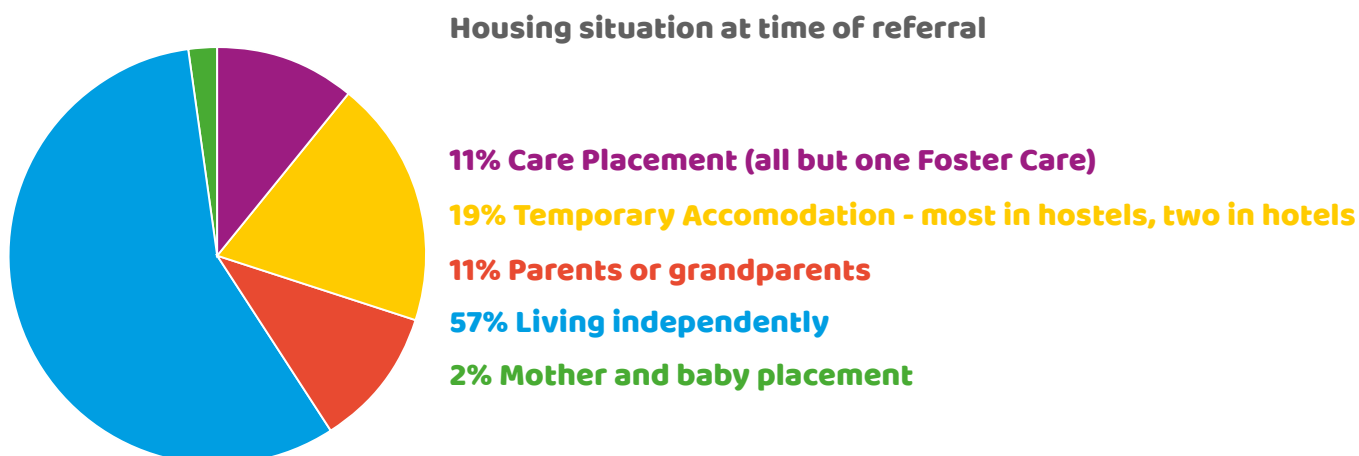
- 3.2.12 Many of the young women have fractured relationships with social services. There's a history where many of the young women have felt let down by the system and there's a consequential lack of trust. Project Unity works to facilitate and broker the rebuilding of these relationships but remote working and the pressures on frontline public services have made this more difficult. To help mitigate the new barriers the Pandemic has brought in its wake, Project Unity has been able to support young women with digital resources and where possible enable them to participate in remote meetings.
- 3.2.13 Trying to **manage on a low-income** is a constant pressure for the majority of the young women. Nearly 70% of service users were supported to access grants, food banks and voucher schemes. Insecure housing and multiple moves cause disruptions with benefit claims and project workers support young women to deal with these problems and gain confidence in contact with the key agencies.
- 3.2.14 For many **housing** is also a big issue. As Roberts et al¹⁵ explain, parents in and leaving care have more limited options than non-care-experienced young parents, for where they might live. Securing appropriate housing is often a pressing and problematic issue for these young women. They have limited control over what accommodation they are provided with and getting safe, permanent accommodation that suits their needs is really difficult. As one of the project team explained:

Housing can be a challenge – these young women have so much staked against them. Sometimes they are placed in Bed and Breakfast. We are often working hard to keep these young women off the streets. We do what we can but it's tough for them.

- 3.2.15 Chart 6 sets out the percentage of service users living in different situation when they first had contact with Project Unity. Over half were living independently, many in fragile circumstances with and without partners. Some of the younger service users were living in a care placement most with foster carers, 11% were living with their parent(s) or grandparents some on a temporary basis. Around 1 in 5 of the young women were living in temporary accommodation – mainly in hostels – often used in appropriately for pregnant young women. One young woman spoke of being placed in a hostel where they felt really unsafe:

I felt very unsafe in the hostel where they put me, all the boys there were dealing drugs and in trouble with the police. It was no place for a young mum and her baby.

Chart 6: Housing Situation at time of referral



¹⁵ Roberts, L, Maxwell, N, Elliot, M (2019) When young people in and leaving state care become parents: What happened and why? Children and Youth services Review, 104, 1-7.

SECTION 3 Findings

3.2.16 Over half of service users (56%) wanted support with dealing with **unhealthy relationships and domestic abuse**. This impacts on the young women's self-confidence, and emotional and mental health. Project workers noted that many service users were entangled in unhealthy relationships with male partners or ex-partners and/or family members.

3.2.17 The case records indicate that the majority (83%) of young women were not in **education, training or employment** when they first came into contact with Project Unity. Around one in 10 young women wanted help with issues around education or employment (for example, organising childcare).

3.2.18 Finally, it should be noted from the case records and interviews it is evident that just about all of the young women engaging with Project Unity are struggling with a **lack of support and isolation**. For some this is linked to their own poor emotional health and debilitating levels of anxiety. Project workers spoke of a number of young mothers that are working with who felt unable to go outside, to travel on public transport – even to take their child to nursery or school.

The service/activities provided

3.2.19 The interviews with young women, referrers, Project Unity staff and managers indicate that at the core of the Project Unity service model is the provision of intensive, one to one emotional and practical support to care experienced young mothers and expectant mothers as they try to navigate care and protection proceedings. Typically respondents concluded that the services provided by the Unity Project were all about giving young women a 'fighting chance' to safely parent their baby, child or children.

3.2.20 The emotional support provided by the project worker was seen as significant and hugely valued by the young women who participated in this review. They were being supported to manage anxiety, decrease stress, and recover from trauma. Some young women had been supported to establish routines and take steps to improve their relationships with family members and partners (or ex-partners). The Unity worker encourages young women engaged in unhealthy relationships to reflect on such relationships, recognise signs of abuse, and tries to give them the confidence and assurance to know what is right and how to get support if needed. Project Unity has forged good links with domestic abuse services throughout Wales and supports young women to access their services.

3.2.21 In addition, staff and referrers understood that Project Unity provided the following types of support:

- Independent living support - accessing housing and setting up home to a 'good enough' standard; dealing with finances – accessing grants, managing income, crisis payments usually for food or transport.
- Support for young women to ensure their rights are upheld and protected. In particular supporting them to engage with care and protection procedures – participating in meetings, accessing legal advice, managing transitions between various placements, parenting assessments and managing contact arrangements, etc.
- Information and advice on local services/support and support in accessing them to counter loneliness and isolation.
- Information and advice on health and safety and advice on minimising risks to baby, child, children.
- Support with accessing education, training or employment.

3.2.22 Contact with the young women was primarily through phone (voice, text and Whats App) and in some cases Microsoft Teams or email. In the autumn of 2021, the team began offering face-to-face contact for those who wanted it. Project staff reported that some young women have expressed a preference to continue to have contact by phone but for other young women the absence of face-to-face contact has been very difficult.

3.2.23 Half of the young women were supported by Project Unity to access other services, notably:

Legal advice (11%)

Counselling or other mental health services (9%)

Housing advice and support (7%)

Debt and finance advice (7%)

Food and Baby Banks (6%)

The case records indicate that only one service user was referred on to or linked into a local parent and baby groups – this can only be because of the absence of such groups meeting during the Pandemic as during the pilot (2017-2020)¹⁶ a third of young women were referred on to such group.


¹⁶ Review and Evaluation of Project Unity (Phase 1) – Learning for Phase 2



SECTION 3 Findings


3.2.24 Unity project workers are very skilled at engaging vulnerable, disaffected young women. In over 95% of the cases opened - young women engaged with the service in varying ways. Whilst the primary service provided by Project Unity was the one to one practical and emotional support provided by the project worker to young women whose actual or potential parenting was the subject of concern to children's services, establishing peer support networks has become increasingly important. Project Unity has run a monthly peer cafe online for the past six months and one face-to-face meeting took place in south Wales shortly before the fourth wave of the Pandemic hit Wales. Public health restrictions have provided real challenges to getting the peer support networks up and running.

3.2.25 The on-line peer café meetings have worked well for some young women with over 30 taking part in at least one activity. The six women who attended the online peer café in October 2021 were very positive about the opportunity to talk to others in similar positions to themselves, make friends and to enjoy and benefit from inputs on well-being, mindfulness and sleep difficulties. One young woman said:




The online peer café meetings have been good – you think it's just you being targeted by social services but listening to the experiences of other – you know it's not just you. That is comforting.

Another said:



They have been amazing! So helpful. Meeting with other young women has been great. Sharing our experiences and getting to know other young people in similar situations. I've been fine doing it online. Great to have a peer café meeting – especially on those dark days. I was badly bullied as a child growing up in care. It has helped me so much to meet people who don't judge you because they've been through the same things...


3.2.26 Other young women interviewed as part of this review said that such meetings were not for them. One described her experience:



I went to a Teams meeting – the peer café - but I didn't like it. I only wanted help with my feelings, my anxiety. I was going through court stuff – my children being taken away. The support I got from (the project worker) was so good – it saved me! She was like a counsellor. But I didn't want to associate with all the drama of it all on the Teams meeting, so I stopped going to those and went back to just talking with [names the project worker] on the 'phone'.

3.2.27 The project team all spoke very positively of the peer café meetings and how the young women were able to share their experiences. One of team said that she saw the peer café meetings as vital for some young women, 'giving each other some hope in amongst their shared experiences and learning how to build bridges with social services'.

3.2.28 One young person who attended the first face-to-face meeting in October 2021 said: 'I attended the face-to-face peer café which was great. It was really nice and my daughter enjoyed it too.' Another young person said she finds it easier to participate in the peer café online:



I've joined the online peer cafes a few times. I would like to have attended the face-to-face meeting last week but the thought of going on a train with my daughter was too much... doing it online though has been really helpful.

3.2.29 As of December 2021 the plan is to continue the peer café with a mix of face-to-face and online meetings as COVID restrictions allow. The team are thinking through how best to facilitate the groups with concerns about mixing young women who are at different stages of the process, that is, women whose babies have been taken into care and placed for adoption with those who are still parenting. The general view of the team is that the peer cafes are a really important element of the service model but that they don't work for everyone – as one of the team reflected, 'it's hard for some to attend, they are so busy with what's going on'.

SECTION 3 Findings

What works particularly well?

3.2.30 All those who participated in the review were very complimentary about Project Unity. The nine young women interviewed all really value the emotional and practical support they received as well as the support from someone who is independent of social services. They really appreciated the opportunities to learn about their rights and entitlements and to get listened to and understood in meetings with social services thanks to Unity's support. Figure 1 provides some key messages from these young women on the things they value most about Project Unity. All the young women interviewed said they would wholeheartedly recommend Project Unity to friends and indeed, to any care experienced young women they came across who needed such support.

3.2.31 Referrers all confirmed that the service was really needed:

It was brilliant. Much needed. Unity are experts in this field. There is not a lot of support out there for these young women and there are a lot of young care experienced women getting pregnant. We provide support where we can but we can't provide the intensity of service that Project Unity do. They can be more hands on. I'm glad NYAS is there. Important to have someone independent – not like us linked to social services. The young women can open up and be honest to NYAS.

FAMILY SUPPORT WORKER

I have been working as a leaving care worker for 11 years – lots of young women are needing the help that Project Unity offers. It's been a massive help to me. I was the only one sticking up for this one young person but it's hard – I had to put in a CP referral but also provide her with support. Project Unity provide a good service but it's been hard with COVID – would have been better if we could have had joint face-to-face meetings.

PERSONAL ADVISER

SECTION 3 Findings

Figure 1: What young women value the most about Project Unity?

Someone who doesn't judge or patronise me

They help you and they are not patronising. They listened to me. And listened better because another professional was supporting me and could explain what I was trying to say.

Someone who helps me deal with my problems

She's helped me with small things – like getting my bus pass set up (I just texted her and asked her for help) as well as talking to me and going to the groups. These small things help a lot – it's hard to sort out these sorts of things when you suffer with anxiety like I do.

Someone I can talk to that I can trust

Talking to the project worker really helped me with my anxiety and with managing the court process.

Someone who believes in me

They stick with you and imply 'we can do this'! Gave me lots of confidence. All my friends buggered off when I had children. There was no support when I came out of hospital (without baby who went into foster care).

Project Unity has been a godsend – social services got involved and were looking at me saying I wasn't stable enough. She helped me to believe in myself again.

Someone on my side who is independent and sticks with me

She was on my side when I needed her. When others were being judgmental Unity was there for me.

She was my guardian angel. The support from Project Unity was amazing. They held my hand through it all. Through the bad times...

Its important Project Unity is independent and not with social services. My advocate fought for me – like a dog with a bone. Rare to find that kind of support in my experience.

Someone who can help me stand up to social services, listen to me and help me say what I want to say

She really helped me to stand up to social services – luckily I had a really supportive health visitor as well. I was so worried that I would be like my mother. It was a gut wrenching feeling. When you are told that you will amount to nothing – you start to believe it.

She [names her Unity worker] is so kind and helpful. She listens to me. She has the right words for what I want to say and she says it in the meetings in a way they can understand. They always look to other professionals to confirm what I'm saying. There's no need – it feels very patronising

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3.2.32 Project workers frequently commented on how young women really needed the service because they were so isolated and alone. One observed that:

The service is really needed, there is no one else there for these young women. The strengths of the service are the building of relationships with young women and understanding what they are going through. Explaining what's happening and supporting them to have a voice. Being non-judgemental.

3.2.33 For another project worker the most important aspect was the fact that Project Unity can tailor its support to the needs and wishes of the young woman: 'The service we offer is tailored around the young woman. Some need a lot of time, for others it's more simple. With one case we are working with – the project worker rings her every day. She has no-one else.'

3.2.34 Referrers were very positive about the support provided by Project Unity as the following observations illustrate:

The project worker was brilliant. She's been great. We have been able to do some joint work and we worked together really well. Project Unity offered much more support than I could – she could attend meetings with the young person but I didn't have that capacity.... She explains things in a way the young person understands. She helps with lots of practical things as well.

PERSONAL ADVISER

The project workers are really good because they explain everything to the young person, help her to understand what is going on. Some are more vocal than others.

SOCIAL WORKER

The support provided was excellent. It's definitely needed – they are so good at engaging young women and explaining things in a way they can understand.

SOCIAL WORKER

3.2.35 Project Unity's service model is seen to be working very well. The project workers have the necessary time and skills to build relationships, provide intensive, young person led support, and help with sorting out benefits, housing and other practical problems as well as engaging young women in opportunities to meet with others in a similar situation for mutual support. Young women are supported to use specialist services when they are available, for example to address substance misuse or anxiety and depression. In addition, where possible young women are encouraged to link in with local groups for ongoing support. However, on this last point the analysis of the case records indicates that fewer young women have been referred to local community groups than in the pilot project (2017-20) bringing into question whether these local groups are still running (because of COVID) and if not how else the project might locate ongoing or 'step down' support for those young women who want it.

What is not working so well?

3.2.36 Participants in the review were asked to identify any improvements that could be made to the services Project Unity provides. Very few made suggestions thinking the project was as good as it could be but a number of issues were identified from the interviews with young women, staff and referrers relating to the following:

- Communication
- Referrals coming in too late
- The discrimination care experienced young mothers face
- Gaps in essential provision

Communication

3.2.37 There were a number of issues arising about communication. Perhaps the most important is to note the **difficulties young women are experiences in communicating with social services and participating in child protection processes** now they take place remotely (because of COVID). The Project Unity team frequently referred to these difficulties, as this project worker illustrates:

It's so difficult for young people to get their points across in these meetings remotely. Many would not be able to join in unless we provided laptops or helped out with data bundles etc.

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Some members of the Unity team advised that social workers and other participants on conference meetings too commonly do not switch their cameras on and some are perceived to be not participating fully in the meeting. There were also examples where child protection conferences are conducted on a group telephone call rather than a video platform and as one of the project workers noted, **'building relationships is so much harder doing it remotely'**.

- 3.2.38 A further communication difficulty encountered is one of **confusion amongst some referrers between the different NYAS Cymru advocacy services**. This was particularly the case for external agencies in the pan-Gwent local authorities where NYAS Cymru's parent advocacy project is located. One social worker who was very supportive of the project and had had a positive experience with a young person who used the service explained:

The project is really important. I'm very committed to ensuring parents have advocacy support but I'm not so sure of the difference between parent advocacy and project unity – I have another case with them.

SOCIAL WORKER

- 3.2.39 One Unity team member suggested that the confusion amongst external agencies about the different advocacy services provided by NYAS Cymru was compounded by the fact that they all covered different geographical areas.

Each of NYAS Cymru's advocacy services have different catchment areas, Project Unity is all Wales, Parent Advocacy is pan-Gwent and NYAS Cymru provide statutory advocacy in about half of Wales. All different and needs to be looked at. People in pan-Gwent are especially confused about the differences between services! The branding of Project Unity is important – it's unique.

- 3.2.40 Another social worker who again was very complimentary of the service provided to a young woman she referred wanted to encourage Project Unity staff to **communicate more directly** so they could get to know each other:

I'd like to encourage them to contact me – if they want more information. I would welcome picking up the phone to talking and I'll do the same. To get to know them.

- 3.2.41 Feedback from one statutory agency indicates that in areas where NYAS Cymru is not so well known it would be helpful for referrers to be given more information about the staffing structure and **contact details of a central Project Unity access point** as well as the project worker's number and email address. A social worker who had successfully referred a young woman to Project Unity explained that subsequently she had a problem when she couldn't get hold of the project worker:

Communication is good but I don't know NYAS and there was a time when I lost contact with the project worker and I didn't know where to go. NYAS is a big organisation isn't it? When I couldn't get hold of her, I didn't know where to go.

- 3.2.42 The most common suggestion for improving Project Unity from young women and external agencies was to **continue to promote the project and disseminate information** about the support provided. Young women offered the following advice:

We need more of Unity – needs to be better promoted with leaflets in libraries, GP surgeries, cups, calendars, a market stall, social media, website. Maybe we can promote it in schools.

Project Unity needs to be better advertised to young women – through social media, posters, café's, leaflets, leaflets at SSD offices, HV clinics. Educate health visitors about care leavers and Project Unity.

- 3.2.43 Finally it should be noted that the **COVID restrictions have had a huge impact on communication between Project Unity and frontline agencies**. Promotion of the service has been taken forward using available remote methods but it is much harder in these circumstances for members of the Unity team to build relationships with front line practitioners

SECTION 3 Findings

and engage them in the all-important debates about the role of Project Unity workers and the importance of independent support for care experienced young mothers subject to the child protection processes.

3.2.44 NYAS Cymru service managers reflected on how difficult it has been to win sceptical social workers over to parent advocacy when the only interaction is over the phone or on a screen with no opportunities for meeting in person and doing joint visits. As one of the Unity managers explained,

it would be so much better if we could meet up in person and have their attention, they could get to know us and trust us.

Referrals coming in too late

3.2.45 The Unity team, other NYAS Cymru service managers and external agencies all spoke of the need to encourage referrals to be made to Unity earlier on in the pregnancy when concerns are first identified by the local authority – to enable the project to work with the young woman before the formal court procedures commence. All the Unity team said that in their experience, by the time PLOs were initiated on a case – it was often too late for the young woman to have ‘a fighting chance’. As one project worker explained:

Referrals come in too late and it's very much a post code lottery. By the time we are involved it's at crisis point - the pregnancy is advanced and proceedings are underway - there is limited opportunity to make a difference. There is little we can do but if we had been brought in earlier we could have made a difference.

Referrers too also commented on this and wanted the project to get involved earlier. One social worker explained that once the case was into the formal care proceedings deadlines are set:

They need to come in earlier – before we get into the court procedures. Sometimes engagement is a problem and they are good at helping with that. There are deadlines once it gets into a PLO and it can be much more challenging.

The discrimination care experienced young mothers face

3.2.46 The young women interviewed all talked about the discrimination they feel they face as care experienced young mothers. Being judged negatively as a parent just because they had been in care. This they felt was unjustified, as these young women explain:

It's really bad how social services treat us - my children were only referred to social services because I had been in care. I had a house, a partner, a job - I was doing well. They became involved because of my ex-partner – and started care proceedings. My health visitor stood up for me. I went through the PLO process meeting with my solicitors – they were awful. Social services made me feel like a bad parent, they offered me some support but I was too fearful to accept. I wanted to prove I could do it on my own.

You shouldn't be tarred with the same brush as your parents. Other people aren't.

Social services should give care experienced mothers more of a chance. Not judge them on their parents – the baby's grandparents! We are not given the chance to prove ourselves. I just want to be there for my kids.

3.2.47 Referrers from both statutory and third sector organisations also recognised this discrimination in their feedback on the value of Project Unity:

I think it's a fantastic project though and I have seen first-hand how crucial this early support is... they need someone in their corner helping them to navigate the systems around them and to challenge when needed especially as those who have been in the care system are more likely to be subject to LA involvement/care proceedings compared to their peers.

ADVOCATE | EXTERNAL

SECTION 3 Findings

All too often when care experienced young women get pregnant the baby is put straight on the Child Protection Register. I had one young person I worked with where I had no concerns about the parenting. She had a good partner, owned her own house and the baby was still put on the Register! They never went further but the stress on the young person of being subject to child protection investigations was huge. Their ability to parent is questioned just because they were

in care themselves. It's not right. I have a lot of young women on my caseload who are praying this doesn't happen. They are frightened of having a baby and what that will unleash. Terrified. I have to talk them through it. But when they are 18 they are just dumped – disgusting... They are hassled and punished – and it's not their fault.

POST-16 SUPPORT WORKER

3.2.48 The trauma caused and the fear young women feel about the scrutiny of social services is illustrated by this harrowing report from one of the project workers.

Case study

I am supporting a young woman who has found out that she is pregnant. She already has a young child who after doing everything the local authority requested of her the case has now been closed.

She regularly talks about how traumatic the whole experience was, worries during pregnancy due to PLO and Child Protection meeting etc; moving to Mother and Baby placement away from all her support networks straight after birth; and the worry and anxieties afterwards, even to this day she worries that the local authority will become involved again and remove her child even with the reassurance that she is an amazing mum, which she is!

Over the last few days I have had a number of emotional conversations as she has chosen to have an abortion due to not wanting to go through the process again with the LA and the worry that if they become involved again they will not only remove new-born but her older child. This young woman has not made this decision with the father for reasons that others who choose to have terminations do but because of her fear of the LA and feeling forced/threatened to comply because if she doesn't they would take her baby.

She spoke yesterday of wishing that she could miscarry so the decision would be out of her hands and she wouldn't have to go through with it. She also spoke about not knowing if this could be her only chance of conceiving again.

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3.3.49 Following discussions with young women in the peer cafes, Project Unity are working with NYAS's campaigns team on shaping a campaign to challenge the discrimination young care experienced mothers face.

Gaps in essential provision

3.2.50 A number of respondents spoke of gaps in essential provision, including:

- Mother and baby placements
- Independent support for young care experienced fathers
- Support for care experienced young women who lose their babies
- Counselling and mental health support
- Specialist services for care experienced young women
- Family support services for young parents

3.2.51 Lack of **mother and baby placements** is a real issue. There is only one residential mother and baby unit in Wales (in Rhyl) and insufficient mother and baby foster placements. Project workers explained that mother and baby placement provision is needed in every local authority as they are of limited use at a distance from everything the young person knows. **As one project worker observed: Asking young people to move 170 miles away from their home area is setting them up to fail.**

Referring to one particular case, the project worker continued:

...the mother was given a choice of a mother and baby unit in Lancashire or the baby goes into foster care. If there are no mother and baby placements this makes parenting assessments that need to be conducted in a safe, supervised environment impossible. Mum has one hour a day contact – online, and they are supposed to show how they can parent.

3.2.52 Three young women wanted to see the provision of **independent support for care experienced dads**. One said,

we need more support for care experienced dads. There was nothing there for my partner'.

Another young woman made the same point:

The service is very much needed but single fathers need it too.

Project Unity recognise this gap and are planning a small pilot working with young care experienced men in 2022.


3.2.53 Project workers raised concerns about the **lack of support for care experienced young women** whose babies are taken into care and placed long term or young women who lose their babies through a stillbirth. Some of the young women affected also spoke directly about their sense of abandonment by their corporate parent. They pointed out that as a care leaver they were entitled in law, to support from the local authority. One of the Unity managers described how this impacts on the young women:

Where the outcome of the case is that the baby or child is removed and placed in care long term – everyone just pulls out immediately – the infant is no longer at risk but there is no support for the young mother – a care leaver that the local authority has responsibilities towards. Project workers are able to support the young women with their anger and upset and the trauma of losing their child. They are so low – they give up on themselves – go off with that violent partner, or into prostitution and it could all happen again. We try and persuade them to get help for themselves – mental health or other therapeutic support. Some do take this up. We have a young woman in this situation who now suffers with PTSD – she phones her Unity project worker on a regular basis.




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3.2.54 The **lack of specialist services** for the young mothers particularly counselling and support with poor mental health was noted by project workers and referrers alike. Many of the young women need specialist help for example counselling and mental health services such as CBD, support with drug and alcohol dependencies, and domestic abuse. Project Unity can encourage and support the young women to engage but such services are currently oversubscribed, struggling with increased demand as a result of the Pandemic and usually, respondents reported, they have long waiting lists. As one Unity team member explained:




Many of the young women with whom we work have problems with anxiety, depression, and alcohol and drug misuse. We support them of course and try and help with those difficulties but some need dedicated, specialist services. Some young women are referred onto specialist services directly by their leaving care support worker – for example to a domestic abuse service – but there’s a three-month waiting list. It’s the same with services that address substance misuse or anxiety and depression. Our directory of services works really well but there is not enough capacity out there for the levels of need.

3.2.55 Other Project Unity workers commented on the **lack of family support services** for young parents.




There’s a real shortage of family support services to support these women in the community. Not very much available at all unless they live in a Flying Start area. Caerphilly has a huge Flying Start project which is very good but it needs to be universal not just in certain areas. ‘Baby and Me’ is a great project run by Newport - providing support to vulnerable young women. But it’s not in other areas... we need more such support hub or groups.



Not enough services out there – there’s Flying Start, and Home Start but they are not universal. There’s Families First too but young women are reluctant to refer themselves – they feel they will be judged by yet another service. There’s a real need for mental health support to help with anxiety and depression – levels of distress have been really exacerbated by COVID.

3.2.56 These gaps in family support services including at a **local, community level** have of course been heightened by the Pandemic. The case records analysis reveals that very few young women were referred on to local community groups like baby massage or parent and baby groups. Only one young woman in the last 12 months compared with nearly a third of service users during the pilot project (2017-2020). This gap was noted by one of the managers:



Women are so isolated and lonely, we need ‘step down’ provision that we can help to integrate young women into – community groups, peer support networks.



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3.3 Outcomes and added value

3.3.1 Capturing outcomes of the services like Project Unity's is a challenge particularly given the significant likely impact of the Pandemic on the well-being and mental health of young care experienced mothers. This review considered data collected in three different ways:

- **Assessments of the progress** individual young women have made on the issues that are being addressed in their support plans. These assessments are completed by the project worker and young person periodically and recorded on the case file.
- **Interviews with young women**, the Project Unity team, NYAS Cymru managers and external agencies who were all asked to comment on what they saw as the impact of Project Unity and to reflect on what had changed for the young woman as a result of Project Unity's interventions.
- **Distance travelled assessments** completed with young women periodically. Project Unity uses a distance travelled tool to assess the progress made with each young person against a number of indicators. NYAS Cymru use these assessments to track the impact of the project.

3.3.2 This section of the report presents an analysis of these data alongside the impact objectives agreed with Welsh Government, as follows:

- Drive and support a reduction in numbers of children entering care in Wales and reduced involvement with the child protection system;
- Ensure that care-experienced young mothers and expectant mothers are empowered to have their voice heard and can influence policy and practice which impacts on this marginalised group;
- Improve the wellbeing of care-experienced mothers, expectant mothers and children in Wales;
- Address a diverse range of issues experienced by care-experienced young women, including poverty, homelessness, health and mental health, employability and educational attainment;
- Provide cost savings to local authorities by reducing demand on their services and preventing escalation of child protection proceedings.

Reduction in the number of children entering care, reduced involvement with the child protection system;

Cost savings to local authorities by reducing demand on their services and preventing escalation of child protection proceedings.

3.3.3 **These two outcomes are linked.** If the numbers entering care are reduced this will provide cost savings to local authorities. Evidencing reductions in the numbers of children entering care as a result of just one intervention is problematic as many other factors will be influencing whether or not children enter care. Project Unity do not systematically record any assessments on whether or not, the intervention of Project Unity has led to a situation where the child is no longer deemed to be at risk and a care episode has been averted. There are no arrangements established with individual local authorities to monitor the numbers of children of care experienced parents entering care. However, case records indicate that in nine cases the outcome of the child protection investigations was that the baby lived with mum; in six of these cases the baby was receiving care and support under a Care and Support Plan (CASP) and in the three other cases there was no social services involvement. Three other cases had concluded with shared care or improved contact arrangements.

3.3.4 One of the Project Unity team who maintained an overview of all cases since the start of the project recalled five cases where she had concluded that the intervention of Project Unity prevented the baby coming into care and another five case where Project Unity contributed significantly to achieving that outcome. She added that it was very difficult to get these positive outcomes when young women were referred to Project Unity very late in the pregnancies after care proceedings had already been commenced.

3.3.5 This view was echoed by others in the team who also said that positive outcomes were difficult to achieve when referrals are coming in so late. One of the team linked the difficulties to the fall-out from the Pandemic:

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The Pandemic is a real challenge, Cases are going straight to PLO, and we're not involved until too far down the line. Social workers are only doing limited home visits, and young people are not getting any support because of limited services which are oversubscribed – this is especially true in relation to mental health services, counselling and the like.

3.3.6 All of the Unity team cited individual cases where young women had been able to continue parenting their children. One project worker also recalled a case where she had supported a young woman through court hearings on contact arrangements with the baby's father and helped her to achieve what she considered was a good result:

I've had two cases where the mother kept her child and the registration [on the child protection register] was closed – one went down to CASP – and we closed the cases. Another where I supported a young woman to get shared custody of her young son with the father.

The case study below illustrates a case with a positive outcome with the baby living with the mother and social services no longer involved:

Case study

Rhian was 15 years when she was referred to Project Unity by a social worker. She was care experienced as a child but had returned home to live with her mother. Because of concerns about Rhian's age and the home environment the baby was placed on the child protection register.

Although she had agreed to work with Project Unity, at first, Rhian was uncommunicative and would only say that she didn't trust professionals. Social services were concerned that she would not talk to them and that her mum was the one making all the decisions.

Project Unity placed a referral for Rhian's mum to NYAS Cymru's parent advocacy service and immediately the dynamics started to change as Rhian could now meet with her Unity project worker alone. She started to talk about her worries and concerns regarding her baby being removed.

Rhian told the Unity worker about a number of issues she had with her health, social services, and her wish to bring her baby home to the family home. Rhian needed a lot of emotional and practical support. She grew in confidence in meetings and went from a situation where the Unity worker reporting her views wishes and feelings to others in meetings to doing it for herself.

The project worker supported Rhian through a Parent Assessment (PAMS) as baby was placed in PLO. She assisted in supporting her with the legal aspects and offering advice and support as appropriate. At the same time her mum was supported by her own parent advocate and local authority noted a change in the whole situation.

Baby was brought back to the family home after birth and almost immediately the concerns were reduced from PLO to child protection. Baby is now 6 months old still living with her mother in the family home. The local authority have no further concerns and have now closed the case.

Care-experienced young mothers and expectant mothers are empowered to have their voice heard and can influence policy and practice which impacts on this marginalised group.



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3.3.7 There was a great deal of positive feedback from all participants on progress against this outcome. The assessments on the case record indicate that in nearly all cases (91%) young women had gained confidence, knowledge and awareness; in 67% of cases young women had been supported to have a voice in care proceedings or child protection processes with progress made on 'speaking out' in 85% of cases. The distance travelled assessments also indicate that good progress is being made on this outcome as follows:


70% of cases recorded a two-point increase of how to access information.

70% recorded an increase in involvement in planning and delivery of services.

90% showed an increase in having their voice heard and sited the importance of Project Unity in their journey to this point.

70% showed a 3-point increase in knowledge of rights and entitlements


3.3.8 This progress was re-enforced in the interviews with the Unity team, young women and referrers. Project workers described how the new confidence and knowledge about their rights that the young women gain is translated into action whereby they feel they can speak up in meetings and get their voice heard:



Confidence definitely! Speaking up in meetings. Knowing about their rights. Ones that I have advocated for initially, now they do it themselves. It's very rewarding to see. They can now ring and speak to housing themselves, for example.

We do not always succeed in averting receptions into care but we are able to help the young person get listened to and feel part of a process that they can understand. Having someone who believes in them, who is non-judgmental, on their side and there to support them makes a big difference. Without Project Unity they would not have that kind of support and we aim to ensure they have all the information they need and understand what's going on – empowering them to speak out for themselves.

3.3.9 Young women referred to their increased confidence and to feeling empowered to speak out:




I learnt about my rights. I had felt that everything was against me but then I had someone on my side.

When I have meetings coming up they help me to have a voice. The project worker used to speak for me at my request but now I do it myself with their support. I'm more confident.

I am now listened to. I'm an adult of 22 with a little boy. I know what I'm doing but I'm looked down upon. Her [names Unity project worker] support to help me speak out has pushed people. They have done more, taken more action than they would have done. In a good way.

3.3.10 Some of the young women who attended the online peer café in October 2021 reported feeling empowered. One young woman said:



We've got to listen to each other and support each other... We can be the biggest voice and make change together.....we have to stand up for what's right...We can become better parents with the right help like Unity. That's what we need... we can't change our past but we are in control of our future.

Another young woman said: 'We should not be judged just because we've been through the care system. We can make a change together if we support each other.

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3.3.11 A referrer, feeding back to the project worker by email in November 2020 (after a meeting) made this observation:

It was good to meet with you this morning and what a change in [names young person] presentation, as you could see she was able to contribute to her meetings and she was able to respond appropriately to advice..... I think that she felt so much more confident attending with [names Project Unity worker] so very different to the last meeting...

Improved wellbeing of care-experienced mothers, expectant mothers and children in Wales;

Addressed a diverse range of issues experienced by care-experienced young women, including poverty, homelessness, health and mental health, employability and educational attainment.

3.3.12 These outcomes are also inextricably linked and considered together. Feelings of well-being relate very much to experiences of poverty, insecure housing, poor health and employability. Progress on improving well-being outcomes has inevitably been impacted by the Pandemic. Young women who were already isolated and without support have been particularly badly affected by the restrictions on contact. One of the Unity team spoke about how this is manifesting in young women experiencing more mental health problems and how Unity have had to adapt the support they provide to be more responsive to these needs:

We are dealing with a lot mental health issues including anxiety. COVID has a lot to answer for, it has really increased the needs. Young people are scared to go out, to get a bus etc. it's all too much. Helping a young woman access a baby massage group has given her so much confidence.

3.3.13 This was also reflected in the feedback from young women, some of whom claimed that Unity had literally saved their lives:

I wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for Unity – they pulled me back up when I was right down.

Everyone needs a unity worker by their side. I would never have made it through this year without Unity.

I have been on the floor, not wanting to live, really dark times but Unity have a way of building you back up. They don't judge you. I'm still standing because she [names Unity project worker] believed in me. We on the same wavelength. Better than a solicitor who I didn't think was on my side. I can't praise them enough – I'd be 6ft under by now without them, I was so depressed.

3.3.14 Other young women spoke more specifically about how Unity had helped them with their mental health difficulties:

They really helped me with getting out and about. I have mental health problems and it was all too much. It has been lovely to get out of the house. I never went out before so it was good.

Helped me with my anxiety and the paranoia I get around social services. Speaking to her [names project worker] really helps me.

I've got more of a routine. I've come on leaps and bounds with my mental health. I'm more focused and I have more of a voice. I'm more trusting of others. Unity has been my comfort blanket.

Advice and support was invaluable. Talking things through with [names the project worker]. I didn't help with my rights and entitlements – I only needed someone I could talk to, someone I could trust.

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3.3.15 The emotional support provided by the Unity project worker is thus highly prized by young women. Case recordings indicated that progress had been made on improving the young person's emotional health in 91% of cases. Progress on reducing isolation and improving support networks was achieved in all cases where this was a need. The distance travelled assessments indicate that 90% of young women experiencing mental health issues stated they felt supported and listened to, with 60% recorded a 2-point increase in improved well-being.

3.3.16 A post-16 worker who referred a young woman to Project Unity commented on the change she had seen in the appearance and demeanour of a young person in an email to the project worker in November 2022:

She looked really happy when she was leaving with you to go to her health appointment. Thanks for supporting her... she just looked so much more relaxed and happy. She actually laughed on a few occasions. It was fab, thanks again.

3.3.17 The case records indicate that around 10% of the women engaging with Project Unity wanted help with education or employment. In reality, apart from a handful of cases, most young women are too busy with keeping

a roof over their head and parenting their babies and children to the standard required by children's services to contemplate looking for a job or enrolling in a training course. As these more pressing issues are worked through some young women are able to move to a place where they can look again at employment and training opportunities with support from Project Unity and other relevant agencies. The distance travelled assessments indicate that 10% of the young women Project Unity worked with in 2020 and 2021 reported improved employability and access to education.

3.3.17 Project Unity provide support with some of the challenges of living on a low income such as advice on debt management, benefits as well as housing. As noted on page 17 of this report many of the young women Project Unity are working with have insecure housing and difficulties managing on low incomes. Project Unity work with housing departments to help the young person access suitable housing and support young women to apply for additional grants and vouchers as well as helping to resolve benefit problems. The case records indicate that in 65% of cases where housing was an issue, progress had been made. Finance was an issue for the majority of young women being supported by Project Unity and progress on that domain was recorded in 82% of cases. The following case study illustrates the work that Project Unity is doing to support young women access suitable housing:

Case Study

Aida had come to Wales from Ethiopia as an unaccompanied asylum seeker at the age of 16 years old. She was placed in foster care but at the age of 19 she had moved from Wales to London to live with friends as she was expecting a baby and had no family or support in Wales.

Project Unity became involved as Aida wanted some support with an accommodation issues as she had been placed in a shared living project, which was not suitable for when the baby arrived. The Project Unity worker provided Aida with information and advice on how to access temporary accommodation in the area where she wanted to live and followed up with the relevant housing department to check what Aida was required to do to be accepted for temporary accommodation.

Aida was able to get confirmation from her current landlord that the property she was in was not suitable for her and the baby, therefore the housing department would need to rehouse her in temporary accommodation once the baby was born.

The local authority were prepared to provide financial support in the form of a deposit and one month's rent if Aida was able to find a suitable private rented property. The project worker was able to provide Aida with ongoing support in accessing information and liaising with her personal adviser when needed. Aida and her baby are now living in safe accommodation together with no concerns from the local authority.



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3.4 Issues arising

3.4.1 NYAS Cymru have done so well to get this project delivered across Wales during a very difficult 18 months. They have been agile and responsive to increasing needs - adapting service delivery and also the support provided to project workers in response to restrictions on face-to-face contact. The additional difficulties the young women have faced as a result of the Pandemic restrictions have been significant with young people testifying repeatedly how the support they received from Project Unity – specifically the project worker – has literally saved their life. The mid-term review has shown that the team structure is working well and the interface between Project Unity and front-line agencies is set to improve with the location of project workers in all regions of Wales.

3.4.2 Inevitably there are some issues arising that would benefit from some attention. Some of these issues can be easily addressed by NYAS Cymru, some require NYAS Cymru to work more closely with local authorities and other issues require local authorities and other agencies to change their policies and/or practice and will need to be part of NYAS Cymru's campaigning and influencing work. The findings of this review should inform discussions with all partner local authorities, the Welsh Government and regional safeguarding boards on how these issues can be addressed.

3.4.3 The issues requiring action are summarised as follows:

For Project Unity/NYAS Cymru to address:

- Arrangements for quarterly case reviews require strengthening.
- Proportion of service users who complete follow up, distance travelled assessments is around 50%.
- The outcomes for service users in terms of the care of their children are not recorded systematically at the conclusion of the case. For example, whether the child (ren) are removed from their care or whether they remain living with their mother.
- Project Board not yet established.
- No provision for young men. A few care experienced fathers or expectant fathers have asked for support.
- Project Unity has more to do in terms of building relationships with statutory agencies (local authorities and health) and embedding the service into the minds of potential referrers. Promoting the service and engaging referrers is an ongoing task.

- Some referrers are confused about the different advocacy schemes provided by NYAS Cymru and/or the central access point for Project Unity.

For local authorities, regional safeguarding boards and public service boards to address:

- The discrimination care experienced mothers and expectant mothers face from child protection agencies
- Young care experienced mothers under the age of 25 receive little or no support from corporate parent (the local authority) after their child is removed from their care or a still birth despite their eligibility in law to receive such support.
- Poor practice in remote working in children's services/child protection – cameras of social workers switched off.
- Gaps in provision notably – mother and baby placements (family-based and residential); statutory advice and support for care leavers; specialist services for young care experienced women such as counselling, CBD and other mental health interventions; family support including suitable 'step down' universal family provision where isolated and lonely young mothers can be supported sustainably. For example, in local parent and baby groups, baby massage sessions.

3.4.4 As well as these particular issues Project Unity should, in light of the findings from this mid-term review, consider the following questions: Is all that can be done to reduce entries into care - being done? What more could be done working in partnership with local authorities and other statutory agencies? For example, to encourage earlier referrals - when concerns are first identified rather than just as care proceedings are commencing.



SECTION 4 Conclusions and recommendations

4.1 The review provides an assessment of the progress Project Unity has made in the last 18 months in recruiting staff and rolling out be-spoke support to care experienced young mothers across Wales. In difficult circumstances Project Unity have done amazingly well in promoting the new service, attracting referrals, engaging with young women and supporting them to achieve the desired outcomes. The service model, tested in the pilot project, has been shown to be responsive to the needs presented albeit that the delivery of support has been remotely for the most part. The review has noted how the Pandemic has affected the very vulnerable young women that Project Unity work with and how restrictions have impacted on efforts to promote and engage front line workers with the new service.

4.2 Understandably some time was lost in 2020 during the long lockdowns we all experienced but in 2021, the team have been able to make up these losses and get the service delivery back on target with 125 cases opened since the project started. This independent review has highlighted the very real needs that Project Unity is designed to address and considerable success in achieving the specified outcomes. The review was commissioned by NYAS Cymru mid-way through the funding cycle, in order to purposely take stock, reflect on progress and identify learning to take forward in the remaining 18 months of the grant. The recommendations below propose action for NYAS Cymru to consider in response to the issues identified from the mid-term review and listed in the previous section of this report.

Recommendations

4.2.1 While the majority of Project Unity's internal systems are working well, the review suggests that two aspects need some more emphasis. The procedures around initiating formal, **quarterly reviews of the young women's support plan** needs to be strengthened as do the arrangements for **capturing evidence of outcomes** on the case records. While arrangements on the latter are much improved since the pilot project was evaluated in 2020, internal procedures should be established to ensure the outcomes of each case - vis a vis who is caring for the child (ren) - are recorded on the case file.

4.2.2 In response to need, it is good to see Project Unity embarking on a pilot to **support young care experienced men**. It will, however, be important to consider the implications of this development for the brand and identity of Project Unity. The team has worked hard to shape and promote an identity that

service users and those working with care experienced young women can understand and easily access. This takes time. Whilst it makes sense in many ways to rationalise the different parenting advocacy projects that NYAS Cymru provides it will be important to try and retain the Project Unity branding for the specialist team working with care experienced young women who are under 25 years of age.

4.2.3 Promotion of Project Unity and the **building of relationships with front line workers** needs to continue, particularly in local authority areas where referrals to date are low or non-existent (see Chart 1, page 13). The review highlighted **confusion amongst some referrers** about the differences between all of the advocacy services NYAS Cymru provides, who is eligible for what service and whom to contact to discuss a referral need as than NYAS Cymru. NYAS Cymru need to ensure that it is very clear and consistent in its messaging and generally 'smarter' in its external communications to address this problem in the short-term.

4.2.4 In the longer term, the sector is currently awaiting an announcement on the Welsh Government's plans to engage partners in **the implementation of its new commitment to parent advocacy** being available across the whole of Wales¹⁷. Until there is a plan in place to deliver that commitment it is difficult for NYAS Cymru to action any re-configuration of the parent advocacy services it provides. It could be, for example that the Welsh Government looks to local authorities for a more consistent approach to commissioning parent advocacy services. Once the Welsh Government's plans are clearer, NYAS Cymru will be well placed to review and re-configure its own network of parent advocacy services in response to any forthcoming statutory guidance or commissioning advice.

4.2.5 The **regional approach to service delivery** is seen by all of the Unity team as working well although it is understood to be challenging for one project worker to develop and maintain relationships with up to six local authorities in one region. It would, in the longer term be preferable (and serve to develop the service to its full potential) to have one project worker servicing only one local authority area. This might be more realistic (in terms of available resources) if NYAS Cymru's Parenting Advocacy and Project Unity were to combine as one, all-Wales parenting advocacy project with specialist 'Project Unity' workers supporting young care experienced young mothers and expectant mothers.



SECTION 3 Conclusions and recommendations

- 4.2.6 Credit must be given to the sterling work that the Project Unity team have done to promote the service and build up relationships with potential and actual referrers across Wales and consideration should now be given to actively **advising external agencies of a central, Project Unity access point**. As the project team continues to grow without the need for a physical project base – it is important nonetheless that external agencies have a central contact point (telephone number and email address) that they can contact when they can't get hold of the relevant project worker.
- 4.2.7 NYAS Cymru should continue its work on influencing activities focused on challenging the **discrimination experienced by young care experienced mothers**. This review suggests that this is the biggest issue for the young women supported by Project Unity. Consideration should also be given to approaching Welsh Government and the Children's Commissioner to explore the need for **guidance on best practice in remote working in children's services/child protection**. It cannot be right that when young people join child protection case conferences and assessment meetings, social workers do not switch on their cameras and fully participate in the meeting.
- 4.2.8 A number of particular **gaps in provision** are also making Project Unity's task of supporting young care experienced mothers to safely parent their children even more difficult. The absence of mother and baby placements, family support services and during COVID, local community provision for young mothers is having a direct impact on outcomes. The paucity of emotional and mental health services available to these young women makes it very hard for them to 'move on'. Project Unity should prepare a briefing on how the gaps in these services are impacting on the young women it works with and how addressing these gaps could help to reduce the numbers of children entering care. The briefing could be disseminated to all local authorities and Welsh Government who are all working to safely reduce entries to care.
- 4.2.9 The findings of this mid-term review should inform an examination of what more can be done by Project Unity and the local authorities with whom NYAS Cymru works, to **safely reduce the need for children of care experienced mothers to enter care**. Many local authorities in Wales have targets to meet on reducing the numbers of children entering care. Project Unity has a key role to play in their endeavours working with young women at particularly high risk of having their babies removed¹⁸. Better targeting of the project and specifically earlier referrals could, it is suggested, make Project Unity's intervention more effective. The necessary discussions with local authorities could also usefully explore how the local authority could **monitor on a real time basis, the number of care episodes for children of young care experienced mothers (under 25 years)** and share that anonymous data with Project Unity.
- 4.2.10 The fact that **referrals are coming in too late** and only at the start of the PLO process is undermining the effectiveness of the support Project Unity provides. A pilot could be established with one supportive local authority to test out the benefit of inserting an expectation on social workers/health visitors/personal advisers to explore a referral to Project Unity as soon as a care experienced young woman is known to be pregnant. At this point the young woman could be made an 'active offer' of independent advocacy support from Project Unity¹⁹. Such a procedure and the take up of services could be monitored through the statutory review process for young people still in the care of the local authority and for care leavers through the post-16 team's case review systems.

¹⁸ Roberts, L., Maxwell, N., and Elliot, M. (2019) *When young people in and leaving state care become parents: What happens and why?* In *Children and Youth Services*, 104.

¹⁹ The concept of an 'active offer' is included in the Welsh Government's guidance on its national approach to statutory advocacy for children and young people. [The Independent Professional Advocacy-National Standards and Outcomes Framework for Children and Young People in Wales](#) describes an 'active offer' as the 'sharing of information about the statutory right and entitlement of a child or young person in certain circumstances to have access to an independent professional advocacy service. Children and young people are entitled to an active offer of advocacy from a statutory Independent Professional Advocate (IPA) when they become looked after or become subject of child protection enquiries leading to an Initial Child Protection Conference.' (2019: Appendix B)



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