

Senedd Cymru | Welsh Parliament

Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg | Children, Young People and Education Committee

Gwasanaethau i blant sydd wedi bod mewn gofal: archwilio diwygio radical | Services for care experienced children: exploring radical reform

Ymateb gan CLASS Cymru | Evidence from CLASS Cymru

Before care: Safely reducing the number of children in the care system

Please outline a maximum of three top priorities for radical reform of services for safely reducing the number of children in the care system.

Priority 1

Priority 2

Priority 3

In care: Quality services and support for children in care

Please outline a maximum of three top priorities for radical reform of services for children in care.

Priority 1

Priority 2

Priority 3

After care: On-going support when young people leave care

Please outline a maximum of three top priorities for radical reform of the on-going support provided when young people leave care.

Priority 1

Wellbeing. Increasingly, research is showing a mental health crisis amongst young people, and we know that mental health is a significant concern for those with care experience, particularly when transitioning out of care (UCAS, 2022)., Whilst increased funding for university wellbeing services is welcome, we call for the expansion of dedicated support staff for care-experienced students.

Recent research (Bayfield 2022; 2023 (forthcoming)) has shown that for care-experienced students, having a dedicated contact with whom they can develop a relationship can smooth the transition into university and make their time studying much easier to manage.

At present, many dedicated contacts across Welsh universities for care experienced students are carrying out this role in an addition to a main role in areas such as Student Money Advice. This limits

the time staff can spend with care experienced students outside financial support. With growing numbers of care-experienced – and estranged – students, dedicated support as a main role is necessary. A Cardiff University care-experienced student explains “When you have someone who acts as dedicated support, and sign posting, for those of us in this situation, one of the biggest benefits is finally feeling like the box(es) don’t need to matter anymore – we can just be seen as whole, 360 degree people.” (current undergraduate student)

Priority 2

Accommodation. The UCAS Next Steps report showed that 69% of care experienced applicants in the UK had concerns about finances when starting University or College (UCAS, 2022). Accommodation is the second biggest cost for a student after tuition fees.

Many universities in the UK already offer 365 day accommodation in Halls of Residence for students with care experience. This offer helps to mitigate disadvantage faced by these students who may not have the equivalent of a ‘family home’ to stay at over the summer break. However, from the experiences of university support staff and research into the experience of care-experienced students, we know that support can go further.

In the Unite Foundation’s This is for Everyone report, 40% of Unite Foundation Accommodation Scholarship students said the most important thing about the scholarship is that it removes stress and anxiety to allow a focus on study (Unite Foundation, 2022). This scholarship for care experienced and estranged students is not available in Wales.

Through the CLASS Cymru network we have been exploring how accommodation bursaries covering some – or all – of the cost of year-round accommodation can not only bring care-experienced students’ experience more in line with their non-care-experienced peers but can also help improve their financial situation and wellbeing.

We would like to see all Welsh universities taking the same approach to this to ensure that a care-experienced person studying in Wales is not picking a university based on financial support but on the course they want to study and the university that best suits them.

Priority 3

Joined-up approaches. Transitioning out of care can be a difficult time, in education as in all areas of life. We would like to see more joined-up approaches across the education lifecycle, with schools, colleges and universities working together to ensure smooth transitions for care-experienced young people who choose to progress their education. In addition, our research (Bayfield, 2023 (forthcoming)) has identified that whilst there is a statutory imperative for Local Authorities to support their care leavers who progress to higher education, the reality is highly mixed. We have had reports of Local Authorities who go over and above, providing financial and personal support across multiple degrees and beyond the age of 25, to Local Authorities reluctant to provide the minimum support required. With higher rates of children taken into care in Wales than the rest of the UK, we would like to see this population better supported to continue their education with more comprehensive support packages from Local Authorities across the board.

Anything else

We are hoping that in the future, the CLASS Cymru website (www.classcymru.co.uk) originally set up through research at Cardiff University, can expand to cover schools and colleges as well as

universities, allowing these priorities to be addressed from a much earlier stage. For this to happen, support would be required at a Wales-wide level (for example, through HEFCW).

Additionally, one area which cross-cuts the priorities outlined here is the need to reflect on the upper age limit of 25 for much of the support available to care leavers and other care-experienced people. With many care-experienced students choosing to enter university at a later stage than their peers (UCAS, 2022), this age cut-off can severely impact their ability to remain in, and complete, a degree.