

IMPACT REPORT

Lwc | Luck: the experiences of care experienced young people - the story so far.



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On 12th November 2024, the Children's Commissioner for Wales hosted an interactive and immersive exhibition in the Senedd. Over 100 attendees were invited to enter a foster carer's 'home', accompanied by the voices of care experienced young people that we'd worked with, describing their experiences of placement moves and unfamiliar surroundings.



Throughout the rest of the pop-up home, attendees were confronted by belongings piled up in black bags, drawers full of deeply personal belongings, a series of lost property and the emotions and feelings of younger care experienced children, powerfully captured through art, poetry and quotes. But there were also some important positives to draw out, like the 'recipe' for a good foster carer or trusted adult in the kitchen, the book titles with training ideas around emotional literacy, and the stories of the sometimes tiny, yet thoughtful and caring moments in a new placement, that made the world of difference.



Background to the work - the ENYA project

The exhibition came from work we'd done with the Hope Girls rights group in Neath Port Talbot. The Children's Commissioner's team signed up to a pan-European piece of work with the European Network of Ombudsperson for Children (ENOC) which focused on Alternative Care. We worked with Hope to participate in the European Network of Young Advisors (ENYA) who bring young people's voices from across Europe to the ENOC work.

From this, ENOC has published a joint statement on the care and support needs for children in alternative care. But the work we'd done with the girls had generated so much thought, discussion, and evocative content, we had to find a way to bring these messages home to Wales.

So we set about bringing their words and experiences to life through this exhibition, and nobody who attended could fail to be moved by what they heard.

The event was sponsored and introduced by MS Sioned Williams, who spoke passionately about her commitment to care experienced young people. The Commissioner followed, speaking about her own promise to children and young people, with this event being part of the promise to help them their voices heard by those that were in a position to change their lives for the better.



We were delighted to have 19 care experienced young people with us too, including two amazing speakers from the Hope group.

In their speech they said:

“It was amazing. Bratislava was beautiful, the food was great, and they had the best ice-cream. But what was really interesting was meeting care experienced young people from across Europe and sharing our experiences and working together to make a change. I still keep in touch with friends from across Europe.

While the recommendations you see today are from our Hope group in Neath Port Talbot, the stories you will hear are from our peers from across Wales, children and young people from age 4 to 21 have taken time to share their story with you.

We hope you listen, we hope you learn, we hope more than anything you make a change.”

“We hope you listen, we hope you learn, we hope more than anything you make a change.”
- young people from Hope girl's rights group.



The exhibition material

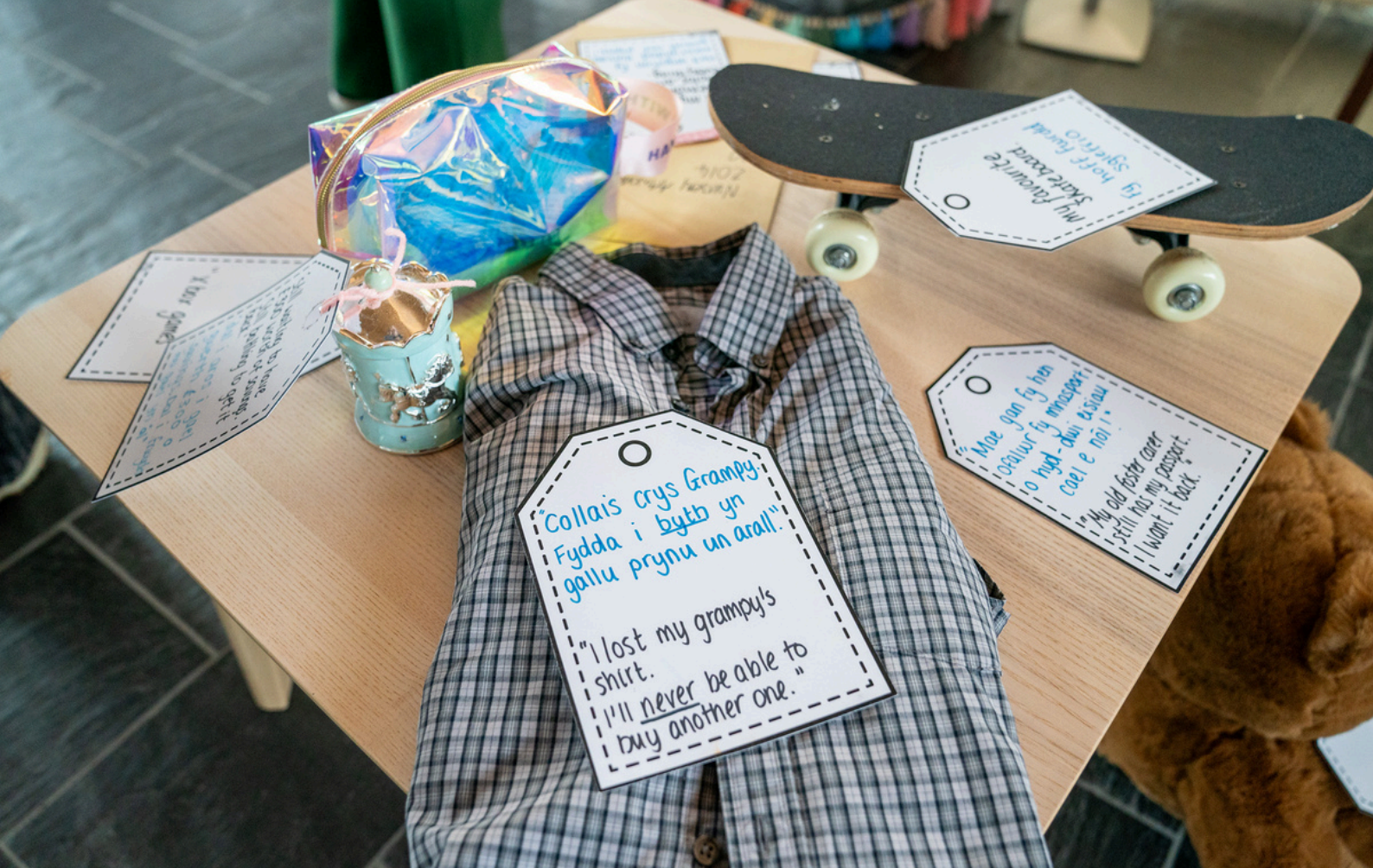
Below are some key quotes which we gathered during our engagement with young people, which were creatively expressed through the exhibition materials:

On being in care:

“It makes it seem that we’re the ones who did something wrong. Like, whenever people have found out I’m in Foster Care they’re like ‘Oh what happened? Why’d you go there? What have you done?’ I’m like ‘Well I didn’t do anything.’”

“I went from being one of nine to the only one. That was hard.”

“What do I even write? Like, where do I even start? I have so much to say about how terrible life has been but I don’t know where to start.”



On placement moves:

“When I moved it broke me, it was one of my darkest times in Foster Care.”

“I’ve moved 5 times and it’s always been in black bags” – young person talking about 5 emergency moves in 12 weeks

“More planned moves so you can take things slowly and have more information.”

“My Foster Carer is trying to make me pay for my boxes and bags to move.”

“Oh I hate seeing my bags packed.” – young person talking about arriving home after school to packed bags



On feelings:

"I still have to use kid's activities like emotions volcanoes to explain how I'm feeling. It feels pathetic."

"I've been waiting 2 years for counselling. Nothing is offered while you wait"

"My trusted teacher left which was a huge knock to my confidence"

"What's the point in waiting until you are in crisis to teach people about feelings and regulating their emotions. If everyone had it from the start it would mean managing the big stuff would be easier."



On packing of personal items:

“My social worker has seen my bras! That just hit me then, my social worker has seen my bras!” – talking about Social Workers packing your belongings

“You should be asked before your stuff is packed”

“Not being able to pack your own bags is anxiety provoking”

“Social workers and foster carers might not see the importance of your stuff” - young person talking about others not understanding the sentimental value you can place on items.

Reflections from attendees:

Over 100 people attended our event, including Welsh Government ministers and officials, Senedd members from all political parties, and representatives from local authorities, health services, children's charities and third sector organisations. We also had a primary school attend who brought young care experienced pupils with them.



Here are some of the messages left by attendees:

- Powerful to listen to children's experiences in their own words some things are easily achievable
- All children have rights no matter what!
- Powerful and important to hear children's experiences and understand the small and bigger shifts that can make a positive difference
- How important children and young people's voices are
- Keep listening to young people
- The importance of the voice of child especially moving placements and new experiences children in care
- Powerful small changes = big difference
- Hearing of homelessness on turning 18 years of age!



Here are some messages we've received since the event from attendees:

- Everyone was very impressed, by both content and methods
- How can I get access to the audio to use for my own staff training
- The 5 recommendations are so fundamental and seem obvious, that's why it made such an impact because many assume that they're already happening...
- The extent to which children and young people are affected by being care-experienced
- The challenges that children in care face on a daily basis, which there are many of, some which I would never even have thought of
- Thank you for sharing your experiences with us with such generosity, confidence, enthusiasm and commitment. I was very impressed with the way you supported and looked out for each other at the event as well. I learnt a huge amount from going around the house and hearing you speak from the stage and in the recorded messages. By sharing your views so openly and clearly helped me understand better the experiences of care-experienced young people and what might need to change to give them a better quality of support and opportunity



The five recommendations from Hope girls' rights group:

These are all fairly straightforward or practical recommendations, but they would make an immeasurable difference to the lives of children in care. Some of those who came to our event thought that these things should already be happening, but it is clear from what the young people have shared with us that their experiences have sadly been entirely reflective of these concerns.

- **Training for Foster carers.** We would like training to include therapeutic techniques and Mental Health First Aid training to better equip Foster Carers to deal with the often complex emotions and ways that young people express themselves.
- **Being able to participate in packing our own belongings.** We would like there to be mechanisms in place to enable us to pack our own belongings. Whether this be helping a social worker/ foster carer or writing a list of the belongings we expect to see in our new home.
- **Belongings should be packed in bags and suitcases not black bags.** We would like there to be a commitment from government that all children and young people in care should have appropriate bags and suitcases to move their belongings.
- **Participation in our care.** We would like to be included in our own care meetings. We would like the guidance to be stronger on what should happen to include us in our own care. Guidance is weak, we need more.
- **Emotional Literacy and therapeutic support.** We would like to see more group therapeutic work happening in school and better emotional literacy sessions for all children and young people. We want Wales to be a country where all children have the words to describe how they are feeling and express themselves prior to anything traumatic happening to them.



Next steps for policy and practice:

The voices and experiences of these young people should drive us all to accelerate our efforts to create meaningful change for care experienced young people.

The current Programme for Government contains 8 commitments to transform children's social care -

- explore radical reform of current services for looked after children and care leavers
- eliminate private profit from the care of looked after children during the next Senedd term
- fund regional residential services for children with complex needs ensuring their needs are met as close to home as possible and in Wales wherever practicable
- strengthen public bodies in their role as 'corporate parent'
- prevent families breaking up by funding advocacy services for parents whose children are at risk of coming into care
- provide additional specialist support for children with complex needs who may be on the edge of care
- continue to support and uphold the rights of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people
- support our national Fostering Wales scheme



We would like to see work around radical reform of children's services and strengthening public bodies in their corporate parenting roles incorporate a response to our five recommendations to ensure that the issues of importance to care experienced children are being addressed.

The role of the national Fostering Wales scheme is also crucial to progressing the recommendations, as the training and advice that foster carers receive needs to reflect and respond to the experiences that these young people have so eloquently shared and explained.



We'd be happy to work with relevant stakeholders around training materials or guidance that can be rolled out to all foster carers, whether new or more experienced, so that they can reflect on their own practice and respond to the needs of children either living with them now or when starting a new placement.



We know that the Welsh Government has committed to refreshing the Part 6 Code of Practice for the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2024, to reflect the 2023 Corporate Parenting Charter. This is a welcome step, but this should go beyond a minor update involving the insertion of a sentence or two to remind people of the existence of the Charter. **In order to bring the aspiration of good Corporate Parenting into reality in practice, Welsh Government must properly reflect upon and respond directly to the sobering but important insights that this exhibition drew out.**

The Part 6 Code of Practice, as currently drafted, is sadly lacking when it comes to the involvement of young people in their own care meetings and decisions. There are many references to the involvement of their parents, but surprisingly little about the child or young person themselves. For an Act grounded in children's rights under the UNCRC, and based on principles of 'voice, choice and control', that feels like a significant oversight.

It is clear from these young people's experiences that more has to be done to shift practices, and therefore having clearer requirements and obligations in the statutory Code of Practice seems the appropriate and obvious place to reflect this important action. Further sign up of public bodies and implementation of the Corporate Parenting Charter is also crucial, and it is vital that Welsh Government effectively monitors whether this approach is working or not, to truly deliver on its own aspirations for radical transformation.

Following the Independent Review of Social Care in England, the Department for Education has published a policy paper ahead of forthcoming legislation in the form of the Children and Well-Being Bill. There is much ambition in that paper around strengthening corporate parenting in legislation and ensuring greater support for all care experienced children. The Welsh Government has not undertaken their own review, but we still must be ambitious for our care experienced children too. A direct response is required, involving children and young people to co-produce revised guidance that deals with the matters that are most important and will make the most difference to their day to day lives.

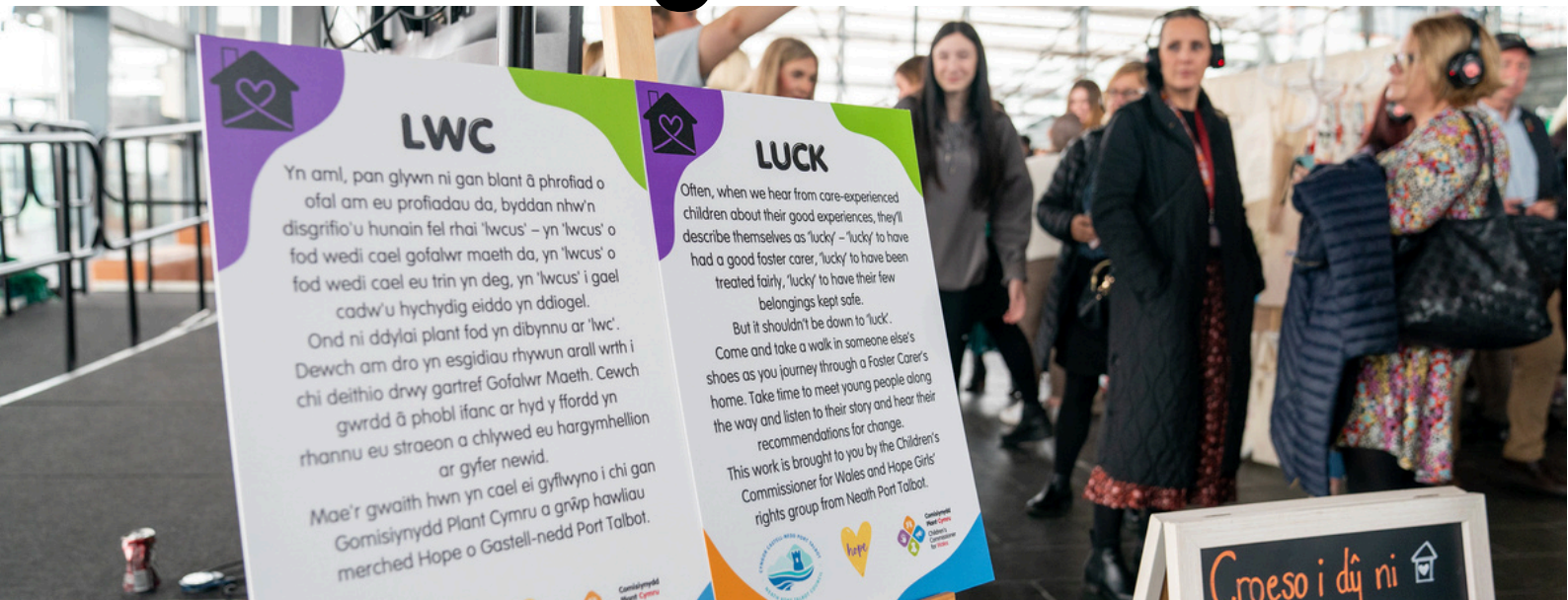


This office will continue to champion the needs and rights for all children and young people, including care experienced young people. We have made and will deliver on our own promise to care-experienced young people



It is not enough to simply say that these experiences should be a thing of the past; we have to make sure that that is the case for every child in Wales and not just a 'lucky' few.

Acknowledgments



We'd like to thank Sioned Williams MS for being a passionate sponsor of the event and speaking to open the exhibition.

We especially want to thank all of those who contributed to the materials that made this exhibition so memorable. Too many to name them all but particular thanks go to:

- Darren, Janine and all the girls from HOPE girls rights group
- Care experienced children and young people from Bridgend Local Authority
- Care-experienced young people from Swansea Local Authority
- Children and staff from Cwm Bach Church in Wales Primary School
- Young women from NYAS's Project Unity from Gwynedd, Denbighshire, Wrexham, Conwy, Cardiff, Blaenau Gwent, Swansea, Caerphilly, Merthyr, Newport, Neath Port Talbot and Torfaen.



CONTACT US

Mae fersiwn Cymraeg o'r adroddiad yma ar gael ar ein gwefan, o dan 'Cyhoeddiadau'. A Welsh language version of this report is available on our website, under 'Publications'.



Children's Commissioner for Wales

Phone

01792 765600

Email

post@childcomwales.org.uk

Website

www.childcomwales.org.uk