

Consultation: Services for care experienced children: exploring radical reform, Children, Young People and Education Committee

17. February 2023

Response on behalf of Learning Disability Wales

Learning Disability Wales is a national charity representing the learning disability sector in Wales. We work with people with a learning disability and their families, Welsh Government, local authorities, disabled people's organisations and the voluntary sector to create a better Wales for all people with a learning disability.

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Our Response

We are grateful for this opportunity to contribute to your consultation on services for care experienced children. We are responding specifically to your first point: Before care: Safely reducing the number of children in the care system.

Our work with parents with a learning disability

Parents with a learning disability and their children experience significant discrimination and disadvantage. While there is established positive practice in supporting these parents, provision is still poor. We aim to change this situation in Wales by influencing the development and implementation of relevant legislation, policies and practices that directly or indirectly affect parents with a learning disability.

In order to achieve this, we facilitate network meetings across Wales for parents and professionals to share experiences, ideas and good practice. We also promote positive practice across Wales to parents, professionals and practitioners and raise awareness of the specific needs of parents with a learning disability.

Our previous partnership project Working Together with Parents Network in Wales, which ended in August 2019, aimed to improve support for parents with a learning disability in Wales, England and Scotland. As well as lobbying for new guidance, we have also worked and lobbied for improvements that have arisen in the report. Including:

- Children's and adult services should work together to agree joint protocols for referrals, assessments and care pathways. Identification of needs must take place as early as possible, preferably as soon as pregnancy is confirmed.
- Parents with a learning disability need information in a format they can understand as they may have low literacy skills or communication difficulties.
- Parenting programmes need to be adapted to the specific needs of parents with a learning disability.
- Support should be on-going and long term.
- All parents should have access to an independent specialist advocate if their children are the subject of child protection and/or care proceedings.
- Training for professionals such as social workers, health visitors and court staff. We have been pleased to provide some diversity training to Cafcass Cymru.

Further details on the above are included in the attached position paper that we produced as part of the project in 2019.

There are a few specific things we want to draw attention here.

Improvement for victims of domestic abuse

One area that could help improve support for parents with a learning disability is better support for victims of domestic abuse. Here it would have been good to look more at the experience of disabled women and why they are more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation than other women. Disabled women, especially women with learning disability, often experience abuse at the hands of partners who they rely on for support. Leaving the abusive relationship can then also mean losing that support. While this is an issue that is particularly pronounced for disabled women, economic and other material factors can be a major factor in keeping people in abuse relationships. Welsh Government should be more explicit on how it plans to empower women to leave abusive relationships by making sure they do not lose vital support when they leave a relationship.

Women with a learning disability are also at higher risk of being targeted by men with a history of domestic violence and/or child abuse. This in turn increases their risk of having their children taken away as they are not

deemed capable of protecting them from harm. Lack of understanding and awareness of abusive relationships is often a significant risk factor for mothers with a learning disability. Many people with a learning disability have experienced some form of abuse for most of their lives, from childhood bullying to being shouted at in the street or even physical assault. In these situations, abuse has simply become an accepted part of their daily lives. This can make it difficult to recognise the fact that they may be in an abusive relationship. People with a learning disability also tend to have very restricted social circles, with few friends or relationships outside their immediate family or carers. This makes them vulnerable to abuse from people who may want to take advantage of them, for example financially, sexually or emotionally. They are vulnerable to what is sometimes referred to as '[mate crime](#)', a form of abuse where someone befriends a person with a learning disability in order to take advantage of them. People with a learning disability often believe that these individuals genuinely care about them and are very reluctant to give up these relationships, even if they are being advised that they risk having their children removed if they do not eliminate these individuals from their lives. Many also have very little knowledge or understanding of paedophilia as it has never been explained to them and therefore they do not know how to protect their children and keep them safe from abuse.

Support for victims of domestic abuse is now always accessible for people with a learning disability as professionals often do not have experience of working with this vulnerable group. Training should be provided on how best to support people with a learning disability who experience domestic abuse and services should ensure that information is provided in an accessible format.

Child poverty

We would like to emphasise the need to tackle child poverty in Wales and to do so by looking at the specific links between disability and poverty. A study into the finances of families of disabled children conducted in 2018 found that only 18% of respondents said that their disability benefits could cover the extra costs linked to their child's disability or health condition. These extra costs are significant, with 33% paying over £300 a month and 10% paying between £500-£1000 a month in disability related costs. 36% reported that changes to the benefits system in the past 2 years had left them worse off. These disadvantages will have been made worse by the effects of the pandemic and the extra pressures experienced by families. The Committee should pay special attention to how policy decisions will affect economically disadvantaged families with disabled children and young people as poverty can also be a significant contributing factor to parents ability to take care of their children.

Independent support

People with a learning disability often are under special scrutiny compared to the rest of the population when they become parents. Many are often already in contact with social services and the challenges they face as parents are often treated as more significant. Stigma, stereotyping and negative societal attitudes towards people with a learning disability and their ability to parent safely also contribute to increased levels of scrutiny and high levels of child removal. As a result, people with a learning disability who have children will often live in constant fear of losing their children.

At the same time that parents with a learning disability can be under additional scrutiny, they also often do not receive the level of support they need to have their own needs met, impacting their ability to be the best parents to their children. In many cases the lack of adequate specialist support for parents with a learning disability in Wales is a contributing factor in the removal of their children. Services such as the Ymbarêl project run by Action for Children in Cardiff and the Vale provide intense specialist support for families where one or more parents has a learning disability that can reduce the risk of children being taken into care. While some parents with a learning disability may only need support for a relatively short period of time, most will need some form of on-going support. Firstly, people with a learning disability may be able to learn new things but their cognitive impairment does not go away and therefore they may need assistance with daily living for the rest of their lives, especially as new situations arise. Secondly, children and their needs change over time. Support services should be available to help parents to promote their child's welfare at different ages and in a variety of situations.

We therefore emphasise the need to offer independent and person centred support to people with a learning disability. This includes specialist independent advocacy for any parent with a learning disability going through the child protection process. It is very important that parents have access to independent advocacy at an early stage and that advocates have appropriate skills and knowledge of both learning disability and child protection issues. Generic advocacy services often lack this specialist knowledge and expertise, and many are unable to accompany parents in court. Self-advocacy can also be a very important tool to help parents improve their confidence and self-esteem. This in turn can enable them to improve their parenting skills and develop strategies for dealing with bullying and harassment. Advocacy and self-advocacy organisations need adequate funding in order to provide good quality support.

Welsh Government has commissioned an important piece of work to develop guidance for professionals on supporting parents with a learning disability with the aim of reducing the number of children taken into care. When the guidance has been published, we suggest that the Committee could conduct an inquiry into how social workers are implementing the new guidance and ensuring that parents with a learning disability get the right support to help keep more families together.

Getting support for disabled children

We have anecdotal evidence from our members that parents with a learning disability will sometimes struggle to get appropriate assessment and support for their children's support needs. We know that some conditions like autism or other neurodivergences run in families. This means that both parents and children may have support needs that need to be met. Our evidence from members suggests that in at least some cases parents with learning disabilities have struggled to get their child's support needs assessed as their behavioural difficulties are simply seen as a result of poor parenting. Here it is important that the support needs of parents and children are both taken seriously and given the attention they need. Again, we would also like to emphasise the importance of advocacy in this context to make sure that people with a learning disability are not denied their support.

Other research

We would like to draw your attention to the 2019 Welsh Government commissioned report [*Research on the number of children in Wales placed into care from parents with learning disability and the reasons behind their removal*](#), which outlines a number of different reasons that parents who have a learning disability are more likely to have their children taken into care. We also have evidence that many of the factors that made life hard for parents with the learning disability have worsened as the result of the coronavirus pandemic and lockdown measures.