

New data raises 'important questions' about consistency of support for children in care

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Social workers in areas of Wales with decreasing care rates feel more confident in the approach of their local authority, a report has found.

The study, from the Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP) and the Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre (CASCADE), sought the views of 792 [social workers](#) and care leaders. The number of respondents makes it one of the largest surveys of people working in [social care](#) undertaken in the UK.

Respondents were asked a number of questions relating to their work. One was how confident they were that their local authority keeps [children](#) in their area safe. Although the survey revealed overall confidence was high, it was higher still in [local authorities](#) with lower rates of care.

According to the findings, practitioners from areas which recorded a drop in the number of children in care were also more likely to believe their local authority had procedures in place to support its vision of [practice](#).

Most of those surveyed agreed care rates in Wales and in their local authority are too high, driven largely by systemic issues. Many felt these could be reduced by offering more early support.

The report highlights the extreme variations in care rates across Wales, with a child in Torfaen being five times more likely to be in care than one in Carmarthenshire. The care rate in Wales increased by 59% between 2003 and 2020, with more than 1% of children currently in care.

Lead author Professor Donald Forrester, based at the University's School of Social Sciences, said: "Respondents conveyed a picture of a sector under [extreme pressure](#)—pressure on both those professionals working in the sector and the families they are trying to support. While many of these pressures have been identified in previous studies, the practices and experiences of social workers and leaders within the sector have

received little research attention until now."

"This report raises important questions about the consistency of help for children in care across Wales. The findings suggest that there are key differences in workers' values and perceptions in those local authorities that have been able to reduce rates. They are more likely to be confident about practice in their area, more likely to report that the 'right' children are being taken into care and they are more likely to feel it is important to keep children with their families."

First Minister Mark Drakeford has identified reducing the number of children in care as a priority of the Welsh Government.

According to the social workers and care leaders who took part in the study, practices within local authorities, and the influence of judges and courts, were considered the biggest factors which affected the likelihood of a child going into care.

Concern was also raised by many about "risk-averse practice" within their authority area as well as the wider system. Those questioned also felt there was inconsistent use of practice frameworks in different parts of Wales.

Professor Forrester added: "It is important to emphasize that this analysis does not provide strong evidence on why care rates have been rising in recent years. The findings tell us what professionals think is influencing the rise in rates, and provides some insights into why the rate varies between areas, from which a strong picture of the system emerges."

More information: Children's social services and care rates in Wales: A survey of the sector: www.wcpp.org.uk/publication/ch...ter-in-wales-survey/

Provided by Cardiff University

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