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Leading Social Services in Wales



# The experiences and views of young people in Wales on living in care home services operating without registration

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# Contents

1. Foreword .....	3
2. Overview and key messages .....	4
Background.....	4
Key findings .....	5
3. The Study .....	7
Participants.....	7
Ethics and method .....	7
4. Findings .....	8
Young people’s perspectives on OWR arrangements .....	8
Experiences of regulated care home provision.....	11
Young people’s needs and their perspectives on what might lead to young people being supported in OWR arrangements.....	12
What care home provision should be like for children and young people in Wales.....	16
5. Summary and key messages.....	19
6. Acknowledgements.....	21

# 1. Foreword

- 1.1. This report presents the experiences and views of 11 young people in Wales who have lived in residential care home services operating without registration (OWRs). Led by the Association of Directors of Social Services (ADSS Cymru) and funded by the Welsh Government, this research addresses a critical and urgent issue within children's social care, of understanding the lived experience of those who have resided in OWR settings. This includes understanding the journey of the young person and how to appropriately manage OWR arrangements where there is no viable alternative.
- 1.2. Over the past decade, Wales has seen significant legislative and policy reform in children's social care, including the implementation of the Regulation and Inspection of Social Care (Wales) Act 2016 (RISCA). The legislation provides a statutory framework for high quality care and support in registered care settings, delivering individualised outcomes. RISCA is complemented by broader Welsh Government reforms, including Removing private profit from children's residential care, promoting therapeutic and trauma-informed models of care and ensuring children's voices and rights (via the UNCRC) are central to care planning and delivery.
- 1.3. However, the sector continues to face challenges in finding suitable registered placements for children, many with complex needs, resulting in a small but proportionately significant increase in OWR arrangements. Importantly, this report seeks to fill a critical gap in evidence by centring the perspectives of young people themselves. Those whose lives are most directly affected by these services.
- 1.4. The findings reveal a nuanced picture. OWR arrangements are not permissible and operate outside of regulatory safeguards. However, many of the young people describe OWR arrangements as providing safety, stability, and a sense of belonging that had eluded them in previous placements. Their stories highlight the importance of compassionate, skilled staff and environments that feel like real homes, embedded within communities. At the same time, the report does not shy away from the troubling experiences some have faced, particularly where agency staffing and poor provision have failed to meet basic needs.
- 1.5. It is essential to state unequivocally that OWRs are not an acceptable model of care for children and young people in Wales. The use of unregistered provision is a symptom of system pressures and a lack of suitable placements, not a solution. The position of ADSS Cymru and our partners is clear, that every child and young person deserves regulated, high-quality care that safeguards their wellbeing and upholds their rights. Positive experiences in OWRs, as described by some young people, must not be interpreted as an endorsement of this model. Instead, these accounts should prompt us to learn lessons for the future, ensuring that all care is delivered within a regulated and accountable framework.
- 1.6. The quality of care is not determined by registration status alone, but by the relationships, culture, and responsiveness of those providing support. However, we must acknowledge that the registration process is in place as a quality assurance mechanism to promote children living in safe and stable environments. The voices in this report call for a sector that listens, adapts, and places the wellbeing of young people at its heart. But the continued use of OWRs must not be normalised or accepted as a viable alternative to regulated care.
- 1.7. We are grateful to the young people who shared their experiences, and to all those who supported this research. It is our hope that the insights offered here will inform policy, practice, and future research, ensuring that every child and young person in Wales receives the care and support they deserve, within a regulated and accountable ecosystem.

## 2. Overview and key messages

- 2.1 This report relays findings and key messages from research into young people's perspectives on and experiences of living in unregulated provision and care homes operating without registration (OWRs). The study was led by the Association of Directors of Social Services (ADSS) with funding from the Welsh Government. 11 young people aged 14 to 19 years old, from seven Local Authorities across five of the safeguarding regions in Wales took part in the study. The aim was to provide a much-needed understanding of young people's experiences and perspectives, in the context of concern from Welsh Government and Care Inspectorate Wales regarding the small but significant increase in the use of care home provision operating without registration, and the capabilities of such provision to safeguard children and meet their needs.

### Background

- 2.2 OWRs include what can be referred to as unregulated placements. These can be improvised or emergency arrangements taking the form of short-term holiday lets or private or council rental arrangements. OWRs can be managed by private providers or by the relevant local authority. In some cases, arrangements are to support one child or young person, supported by staff according to any stipulated safeguarding ratios (e.g. two staff to one child). Such staff can be permanent and from the local authority or private providers, or agency staff. In some cases, these are local authority arrangements, effectively running as a children's home and as yet unregistered, with a permanent staff team supporting more than one child or young person.
- 2.3 It is an offence to provide a regulated service without registration<sup>1</sup>. Registration and ongoing monitoring and inspection of care home provision is managed by Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) as the regulator of social care in Wales. CIW detail that a core function of this role and the purpose of registration is to ensure that children and young people are safeguarded and receive good quality care that meets their wellbeing, care and support needs, and ensures good personal outcomes<sup>2</sup>.
- 2.4 In their report into OWRs in Wales<sup>3</sup>, CIW acknowledge the challenge for local authorities to fulfil their safeguarding duties to provide safe and suitable accommodation for looked after children<sup>4</sup>. The use of OWR arrangements is understood to exist in a context of a lack of provision and difficulties finding suitable provision for children with a range of complex needs or who are subject to a welfare order. The report details CIWs 'proportionate case-by-case approach to all enforcement decisions' (p6), given these challenges.
- 2.5 Aside from the CIW report there is limited evidence on the use of OWRs in Wales<sup>5</sup>. What is known from children and young people who have lived or are living in OWRs is largely anecdotal or unpublished, being shared through feedback to local authorities<sup>6</sup>. An

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<sup>1</sup> The Regulation and Inspection of Social Care (Wales) Act 2016. Section 5.

<sup>2</sup> CIW (2019) *Inspection framework for care home services, secure accommodation services, residential family centre services, and domiciliary support services* Crown Copyright.

<sup>3</sup> CIW (2023) *Report on care homes for children operating without registration 1 April 2022 – 31 March 2023*. Crown Copyright.

<sup>4</sup> Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014. Sections 75, 78 and 79.

<sup>5</sup> This is similar to the evidence available in other UK nations being published by, for example, OFSTED in England.

<sup>6</sup> There were no returns to searches in the SCOPUS database or UK social work journals for published research or articles on children or young people and experience of OWR arrangements.

unpublished case review analysis of eight young people in Wales supported through OWRs, undertaken by ADSS in 2023/47, indicates that:

- 2.5.1 Young people had high levels of psychological, emotional and behavioural needs, and were being supported by the Child and Adolescent Mental Health service (CAMHS), clinical mental health hospital teams or other psychology services, and youth justice. Prior to the OWR young people had been placed in secure arrangements (one under a criminal order) or detained due to their mental health. Seven of the eight were subject to a Deprivation of Liberty Order (DoL).
  - 2.5.2 OWRs were used principally due to a need for a 'step-down' from secure arrangements or hospital/sectioned arrangement, or in response to immediate notice being given from a residential placement, or as a result of a breakdown in special guardianship arrangements. In all cases a number of prior searches were made to find suitable accommodation within existing provision, and none were able to accommodate for the young person and their needs. All but one of the young people were judged to require 5:1 or 3:1 staffing arrangements. OWR arrangements were in place for between five and 12 months or were ongoing at the time of the case review analysis. Three of the arrangements continued but as newly registered homes. Two OWR arrangements were ongoing with one of these in the process for becoming registered. One young person returned home. One young person went to a young offenders institute and one went to a secure facility.
  - 2.5.3 At least four of the eight young people reported to staff that they wanted the arrangement to continue and/or that they felt safe and happier in the OWR. At least one of the placements was judged to be detrimental for one of the young people.
- 2.6 Given this wider context around the use of OWRs and the lack of research evidence from young people, this research was commissioned to provide an in-depth understanding of young people's experiences and perspectives of OWRs, providing evidence to inform decision-making around their use and the capabilities of OWR provision to safeguard children and young people and meet their needs.

## Key findings

- 2.7 Young people have mixed experiences of OWR arrangements. However, the majority of these young people shared very positive views and stressed how important these homes have been for them and their wellbeing and possible future outcomes.
- 2.8 The status of a care home arrangement being registered or unregistered does not seem to be a key marker or driver of quality care experiences for these children and young people. Key drivers for these young people are relationships with staff, and a sense of the provision being structured around their needs, including the home environment itself.
- 2.9 Children and young people need trained and skilled people in care service provision who are able to address their emotional, social and other wellbeing needs. They also need staff who can understand their needs to know how to respond to their behaviours, including ways that do not require force and which help them.
- 2.10 The use of agency staff is particularly problematic in OWR provision. Findings indicate a lack of skill amongst this workforce and a concerning standard and level of care provided for

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<sup>7</sup> ADSS. 2024. *OWR initial case review analysis – confidential and unpublished report*. ADSS.

children and young people. There are some similar findings, however, relating to care and support by both agency and non-agency staff in registered provision.

- 2.11 It is evident from these findings that there may be issues with a 'safety first' culture within residential care provision that prioritises safeguarding needs over other care, support and wellbeing needs. This is in terms of the provision itself, and the environment created for children and young people, and responses prioritising a risk-based focus on managing behaviours.

## 3. The Study

### Participants

3.1 The study involved 11 young people from seven local authorities across Wales, with representation from five of the six safeguarding board regions. All of the young people who participated have been supported through OWR arrangements at least once. Some of the young people had multiple experiences of OWR provision. Five were living in unregistered arrangements at the time of the research. Their experiences in OWRs include statutory run care homes currently seeking registration; private rental arrangements, or short-term holiday lets, managed by private providers or the local authority and supported by members of a permanent private or children's services team, other local authority staff, or agency staff. Young people were aged between 14 and 19 years old. Four were aged 14 years; three were 15 years old; two were aged 16 years; one was aged 17 years; and one had just turned 19 years old by the time they took part in the study. Four were female and seven were male, including two trans young males. Nine of the young people were under the care of the local authority; one had recently returned home to live with family; one was now being supported in independent living.

### Ethics and method

- 3.3 Ethical scrutiny and approval was given by Cardiff University Social Science Research Ethics Committee. Participation was voluntary and all young people actively chose to take part, having first been fully informed about the study and what they would be asked about in relation to their own experiences. The research took place in the young people's homes. All young people were accompanied on first meeting and eight of the young people asked to have staff with them in the room during the interview; one young person had their parent there for some of the interview. Two young people preferred to take part without anyone else present.
- 3.4 The research utilised semi-structured interviews, combined with creative activities for some of the young people to support them to share their views. Interviews lasted between 25 and 85 minutes, with the majority being an hour long. Interviews were guided by the following four research areas:
1. Young people's experiences of living in unregistered placements/homes.
  2. Young people's needs at the time they moved into and lived in these arrangements/homes.
  3. What leads to young people being supported in these arrangements/homes.
  4. What good care home provision should be like for young people/key important messages for people making decisions about care provision and care homes for young people.

## 4. Findings

### Young people's perspectives on OWR arrangements

4.1 This first section details young people's perspectives on and experiences of living in OWR arrangements. In the main, the young people emphasised how important and positive their time being cared for in an OWR had been for them. There were (also) however, some negative experiences shared, and these were set alongside experiences of care in registered homes.

#### OWR arrangements as a positive experience

4.1.1 The majority of young people described very positive experiences of living in OWR arrangements. For these young people, they were keen to stress just how important this provision had been to their emotional and physical wellbeing, feelings of being cared for, progress with education, and future outlook. They talked about feeling cared for, feeling happy, being involved in things they enjoy, learning again and having plans for being back in school and personal goals. For three of the young people, the importance of their time living in the OWR provision was expressed in the starkest of terms, that they felt without the OWR provision that they would no longer be alive, as we hear from Fred and his mother:

*Fred (aged 16): If it wasn't for [the OWR], I wouldn't be the same person now. So, like if it wasn't for [the OWR], I'd still be, probably be.*

*Fred's mother: Don't even know where he'd be. I think he'd be dead, because it was that, he was, he, it was that just (pauses)*

*Fred: Yeah.*

*Fred's mother: It was dangerous, it was. He was (pauses).*

*Fred: Yeah, if it wasn't for [the OWR], like I appreciate it so much. And the people there, I do really appreciate everything they done for me.*

4.1.2 Relatedly, all these young people were keen to express that their behaviours had changed as a result of the OWR, describing how, while they were in the OWR, there had been no 'incidents' of violence towards property or others, or behaviours such as harm to self, running away or going missing. They explained that they felt less stressed, happier and more hopeful as a result of the care and support they experienced in the OWR, as Flo tells us:

*It's been much better. Not run off, kicked off, what else? Not damaged anything. Back into football and sport. Yeah, going to watch the [football] games, doing activities I want to do. Basically. I forgot to say that, basically you get a personal plan, so on the back you've got your goals. And then you've got what basically they will help me with. Flo, 14.*

4.1.3 For the young people who have had very positive experiences of OWR provision, their emphasis was on the care and respect they had received from staff, and the ways in which staff attended to their needs. This was explained as being very important to the young people. Staff described positively were social work and local authority staff, and those employed through private providers. The young people described staff who were 'respectful', 'inspiring', 'kind', and 'comforting' who would talk to them and actively engage with them. Some of the young people described instances in which staff had shown care towards them, by talking with them about their feelings and their

key relationships, or noticing their interests and encouraging them. Crucially for the young people, they felt these staff did not judge them, were 'able to see all sides of things', understood their needs or 'triggers', and so did not make assumptions about them regarding their behaviours; instead, staff listened to them and were flexible and reasonable with 'rules', making allowances for and accommodating the young people's needs. This is something that is explained by Lydia, when describing the importance of the support given by staff in the OWR:

*"I think it's more [about the] support and opportunities, for us kids, like. Because I think it's more like a, it's like a residential to me, but it's just more better. And they actually listen, and they actually, you know, take in to your needs like, and what you're actually saying. So it's just not like rules after rules after rules. It's not just like, you know, everyone's got the same rules. It's like everyone's got their different stuff. And they can go out, and they can, you know, if they're sad or whatever, they can just go in their flat, or they can, speak to staff. So it's just nice."*  
Lydia, 17.

- 4.1.4 In addition to the ways in which staff engaged with them and offered emotional support, the young people also described the importance of more practical support they received from staff. This was particularly in relation to having daily activities, weekly routines, and support with education. Some of the young people also described how they valued being supportively shown life skills such as how to cook or use a washing machine, and of having lifts and someone going with them to appointments or to support them when undertaking activities. Fred explains in the following, the routines in the home he valued and what these meant to him:

*I'd wake up, and then they'd even make me breakfast before I got washed and dressed or whatever. So, I'd have breakfast, then get in the shower. And then I'd play my game for a bit. And then, say, I've got to do an activity, so I'd go play golf, and then we'd go food shopping, come home. And then, yeah, that's about it. And then on Fridays, like if you was well behaved, you got takeaways, anything you wanted. I was never sad, it was the best I've ever been, to be honest.*  
Fred, 16.

- 4.1.5 Another related point raised by all of the young people was regarding the absence of the use of force. The importance of being listened to and being understood, was set against experiences shared by all the young people regarding the use of force towards them by staff in their other experiences of registered residential care. All of the young people explained previous experiences of staff quick to engage in the use of force, describing a number of incidences in which situations escalated quickly as a result. This was described as being different for them in the OWRs and was part of shaping their positive experiences and changes in the ways they responded to staff:

*"Just moved into here [the OWR], and it was just better. Because it was just better staff and that. Instead of just being annoying and shit, not letting me go out and fucking (pause). [Before] they'd actually, they wouldn't let me out, and they'd fucking just force me fucking away from the door. Here they are just nicer and that. Yeah, just chat to me and shit. Because sometimes they'll just like (pauses) some people will judge you because like you're in care and that, they will judge you."*  
Caleb, 14.

- 4.1.6 The young people also shared about the importance of the location of the OWR, valuing it for being 'on a normal street', close to family and friends, close to buses or within walking distances of shops and facilities and not 'hidden away'. Two of the young people also described how being far away from family and friends and in a

rural area can be a helpful 'reset' and 'a break away from things' if they know it would be for a short time. In the main though, the young people liked that the rental and holiday lets were typical houses in amongst community, and this felt to them to be 'more normal homes'. This included the absence of some of the features they had come to expect in care homes, particularly locks on every doors and parts of registered homes being inaccessible. These points are typified in the following by Jax:

*"There's not locks on every door. Here there's a lock on the front door, there's a lock on the back door, there's a lock on both of the bathrooms. So there is no like real way to restrict if I wanted to go downstairs into this room, and I feel like given the option with the [registered] residential staff, a lot of people would lock everything up at night, like every single door. I've had experiences where that's actually happened. And what's nice is that I'm not in the middle of nowhere, because most of, obviously most [registered] residential placements are in the middle of nowhere. I can walk right out of the door, there's a shop down there I can walk to without having to walk for like 30 minutes. I have a friend that lives down the street that I knew before I even came into this placement. A two minute way away, I was like, as soon as I came here, I was like, wait, I think I live right next to you now."*

*Jax, 16.*

## **Negative experiences of OWR arrangements**

- 4.1.7 Some of the young people (also) described very negative experiences of OWRs, emphasising inadequate care and provision. In all of the experiences of OWRs that were described negatively, these were also described as being staffed by agency employees (including social workers as agency staff), and it was principally because of their experiences with agency staff and the lack of care shown to them that the OWR was viewed as a bad experience. The young people shared some quite troubling stories about the neglect of their needs by staff, with examples ranging from a lack of communication or willingness to engage with them, and a lack of understanding or concern shown; to stories about staff 'drinking on the job', telling the young people they are 'a waste of resources', and staff assuming 'the worst' about them because of things written about them in their file. There was little relationship developed with these staff, and this was exacerbated by the lack of consistency in the agency staff caring for the young people. Such experiences were described as creating stress, anxiety, fear, and a lack of trust. This can be seen in the following, from Flo and Josie:

*"And once, when I didn't know who was, who they were, they didn't even introduce themselves to me. They didn't tell me anything. And I was just sat down downstairs, and they said to me, are we going out anywhere? I was like, no, I don't feel like it today. Shouted at me and said we're here to support you, not to be hated. I said I never said I hated you. So, it just made me a bit upset. My mum was supposed to come over that day as well. My mum couldn't make it. So, made it worse."*

*Flo, 14.*

*"Basically, they were all agency, so like there would be different people every day. And like some of them were alright. But some of them were just rude. And just stubborn, and just didn't care... it was a bit stressful, because then like if, like yeah, you just don't know who's coming. Like you genuinely don't know who's going to be at the house. It could be a serial killer at the house."*

*Josie, 14.*

- 4.1.8 Food and the absence of having 'proper' meals cooked for them was also particularly important for the young people, being something similarly described in every example

of bad experiences of OWRs that they shared. Young people talked about ‘being given pizza every single day’, or fed takeaways, or of staff refusing to cook for them. The issue with food, which was clearly important to these young people, did, in part, seem also to be shared as an exemplar of the absence of overall care in these OWRs, being an example of the most basic of needs they had being poorly met, as explained by Ruby:

*“If it’s agency staff, you can’t even get a conversation out of them. So, you’re like, practically just living in a house by yourself, which would be better, to be honest, but, they couldn’t really care what you did really. Like, they just get you a Maccies every day instead of doing a food shop, which was, I thought was really annoying, because I was like, I just want actual food, not Maccies every day. You could literally just get away with murder, which is just bad, to be honest.”*

*Ruby, 15.*

- 4.1.9 Four of the young people also described OWRs that were ‘mouldy’ and ‘freezing cold’, ‘dark’ and ‘smelled horrible’, and were ‘creepy’ and ‘scary’ for being too big or not like typical houses. These were also places in which young people did not have adequate space for their things, slept on mattresses or on (smaller) children-sized beds, and which did not have ovens or proper cooking facilities, or washing machines. In describing these places, the young people also shared how these were not happy, and for some these felt unsafe, places to be. Their experiences of the feel of these OWRs did also seem to be linked to how these places were staffed and the care they received, with the same young people describing themselves as ‘just staying in bed’ or in their rooms ‘all day’, having no one to talk to or no one talking to them, and feeling ‘stuck’ indoors. As can be glimpsed in the following:

*“[It was] a shithole. Look, behind the door, it was full of mould. Freezing cold all the time. It was just freezing... And they [staff] wasn’t meant to be sleeping in the night, yeah. And then I’ve walked downstairs, and they just be sat there sleeping... it was like different people all the time. I’d be eating pizza every single day, because that’s all they would buy... I was waking up at 6, 7 o’clock at night. I was just sleeping all day.”*

*Carter, 15.*

*“It was very unclean, it was very small, there weren’t any room to do anything, the living room just about had a TV that worked. So, with the Airbnbs, I had [children’s services] team, with the rentals, I had agency. So, with the Airbnbs, they were very picky with the places, I would say... like, they were all picked really well, they were all comfortable, they were able to actually be able to do things, and not just be stuck in one room all day, in a tiny little room where the lights don’t fucking work.”*

*Gabe, 19.*

## **Experiences of regulated care home provision**

- 4.1.10 For seven of the young people, their positive experiences of OWRs were set by them in contrast with very negative experiences of registered care arrangements. These negative experiences they described aligned with many of those detailed above, with the young people sharing similar troubling experiences with private and local authority staff in registered homes, as those with agency staff in the OWRs. They also described the effect this had on their mental health and their behaviours. This can be seen in the following points shared by Jax, and Fred:

*“Okay, so I've been through 17 different placements. I have nothing really positive to say about [regulated] residential places. I've been here [the OWR] for 15 months. And I've done the most that I've ever done anywhere, like out of anywhere else”*

*Jax, 16.*

*“Well, when I got put in [OWR], then I started realising like everything that I've done, and why I done it and stuff like that. And then when I got placed in [registered] , I just lost my head even more. But if I would have stayed in [OWR], I would have been like sound. But when I went to [registered], it just made it worse, sort of thing. Well, my mum worried loads about it as well, because I used to cry. I used to call her up going mad and crying and everything when I was in [registered]. There was no town there. The, I had to walk two hours just to get to near [city] to get a taxi to the train station, didn't I? Yeah. I used to walk two hours, the snow was up to my legs, up to my there, and I walked two hours just to come home. And I never tried, I was never, naughty in [OWR], was I? I never kicked off once, never had an argument, never got, restraint, never run away, nothing... I was just in the middle of nowhere, in my room 24-7, doing nothing. I lost my head badly. I felt like so trapped and everything, it was horrible there. I was there for ages.”*

*Fred, 16*

- 4.1.11 Three of the young people who had negative experiences of OWR provision, shared positive experiences of regulated provision. Two of these young people were in local authority registered homes and one was with a private provider. While these experiences were not necessarily expressed by all with the same emphasis or urgency as given by those keen to share how important OWR arrangements had been for them, they shared positive experiences for very similar reasons. For example describing the importance of their relationships with staff, doing activities, and the feel of the home. For Ruby the importance of her relationship with staff was described in terms of them being like family, because she felt looked after and cared for:

*“it's like, you're more active, I guess. Like, you're not just sat in the living room by yourself with two random staff members. Like, you can just chill in your room or come down and do something. There's a lot more like, activity, there's more leeways with activities as well... There's like, more of like, a family dynamic sort of thing where it's like, I don't know how to describe it. Like, we say that the pets are your [staff] grandchildren, we all say that. It's like, you're looking after me, I'm looking after a rabbit, therefore a rabbit's your grandchild.”*

*Ruby, 15.*

## **Young people's needs and their perspectives on what might lead to young people being supported in OWR arrangements**

- 4.2 This section details the young people's perspectives on the needs they had at the time the OWR was arranged and, relatedly, whether there were any missed opportunities before the OWR and if anything could have been in place to help them to stay living in their previous (registered) care provision. Findings indicate that the young people had emotional, educational and wellbeing needs, and experienced a lack of care and support such that this impacted on their behaviours. They felt that people could not or did not want to support them as a result of their behaviour, and it was this reason that led them to being supported in the OWRs.

## Trauma, emotional or mental health issues

- 4.2.1 Almost all the young people described having emotional needs, unresolved trauma or mental health issues and this being significant for them. Some of the young people talked about specific things such as struggling with 'anger' related to key relationships, or having high anxiety, or having 'undiagnosed ADHD' and finding it hard to settle at times, or of having difficult relationships with food. Other talked more generally about how there should be an understanding that all young people in care will have emotional needs and that these needs will be different for each young person. Crucially for them, they felt there was a lack of understanding or support from staff about these needs, and in how to respond, and also that the care environment could sometimes exacerbate these. For example a number of young people talked about how they struggled at times with being in the home with other young people, with the locked doors and of having constant reminders from the physical environment that they 'are not in a normal home'. They also felt that the majority of staff they had encountered did not have the ability to appreciate these needs or have the skills to know how to respond in ways that would help them. This is something explained by Gabe, below:

*"Yeah, so my needs at the time were quite high, I was a flight risk, I was a danger to myself. At one point, they said I was a danger to others, which confused me, because I weren't. I was just an angry teenager. But I was very, tried to hang myself a lot, I tried to slit my wrists a lot, I tried to overdose a lot, I tried to drink bleach a lot, I tried to do a lot of things, jump out of a car, jump in the road, train tracks, this, this, this. It's one of those, where the levels just keep going higher and higher and higher. None of the needs were met, none of them were trained enough to deal with trauma, none of them knew how to deal with me overdosing, me self-harming, me trying to hang myself. None of them knew what to do. All they knew what to do, phone the police, police come in, police have a go at you, police then are like, well, we can't do nothing, because you're in the house. Forced to hospital, cuffs behind your back in front of everybody."*

*Gabe, 19.*

## Educational needs

- 4.2.2 Seven of the young people talked about not being in education and knowing themselves to be 'behind' with their learning. They talked about how the moves between different foster carers or care homes had disrupted their education, or that they had been excluded from school, that there was limited opportunity or encouragement to engage in learning by staff in their care homes, or that they were subject to restrictions that meant they could not learn. For example, Ruby explained that before her current care home, as a punishment for getting her nose pierced without permission, her laptop was taken off her which meant she could not then engage in learning. For some of the young people, they explained that they still did not understand why they had not been in school or fully know of plans for returning to education. All seven of these young people talked about knowing they had big gaps in and were therefore worried about their learning.

*I haven't gone to school since I've been here. The first like month, no, like the first two weeks I was here, I was supposed to be doing my GCSEs. But there was like, the social worker was like, you can't, because for some random reason, and then it was like, you can do your GCSEs in college... I do want to do that, yeah. I can say that's another thing as well, like you don't get told much, as well, about yourself, if that makes sense.*

*Leon, 15.*

*In terms of starting to pick up education again and going to college, because in my other placements, they didn't really prioritise education. So, from between the ages of around seven to 15, I did not attend school for the most part.*

*Jax, 16.*

### **Lack of things to do and a need for space**

4.2.3 All of the young people talked about unhappy periods when they were lying in bed all day, did not have a purpose to get up, 'were sitting around doing nothing' and were stuck with nothing to do. While they did not explicitly refer to this as a need, they did also talk about how this contributed to feelings 'of going mad' or of 'being stuck in their head' and of being bored and this contributing to their feelings of depression, and 'need to get out'. Relatedly, they described needing to get away from the home to have some space from the environment. Some were subject to safeguarding orders meaning they had to be accompanied by staff at all times. They all described how trying to leave the home would lead to friction and an escalation in arguments with staff, or that they would run away and 'go missing' all the time to get out of the home. They explained that these behaviours were part of the cause for being moved to a new home. Their positive experiences of being encouraged or supported to do activities and being taken out for the day, or being allowed to leave the home and go for a walk, were framed against these experiences. As Ruby describes:

*"There's a lot of support to do like, the things you want, and there's a lot of like, leniency with those things as well. Because like, in other placements, I could just say like, can I go for a walk here and it'd be like, no. Okay. Then like [here], if I ask, it'll be like, okay, who do you want to go with, I'm like, this person."*

*Ruby, 15*

### **Need for connection with friends and family**

4.2.4 They also described the need to see their families and friends, and how sometimes this was not encouraged, or they were in care homes located in places that made it logistically difficult to see family and meet with friends. Some of the young people described how they were not allowed friends over to their home or allowed to see or stay out with their friends and had to be home at what they saw was an unreasonable time, being very different to that given to their friends. Or they were in homes that refused to drive them the distances needed to friends and family. Some of the young people described how they would have phones taken off them and this meant they lost the ability to connect with their friends and family. They explained that they would then run away to be able to see family. Fred described how while a police order meant he was not allowed to go and visit his mother and gran, in the OWR they were encouraged to visit him there and so he knew he could still see them, and this was different to his other care experience which led him to run away. Lydia details here why friends in particular are important to children and young people in care:

*"You need to be able to see your friends. And if you don't have that, then I think that's where people end up going down bad paths, and not themselves. And I think because they just feel like, you know, you've put them in care, you basically took their whole life off them now. So, it's just like they had something, and now they have nothing at all. So, I think that's the biggest struggle. But I think, you know, if they're able to, someone to drive them, or even pay for their trains. But it's just like, you know, I think that's what they need. Consistency."*

*Lydia, 17.*

## Inflexible rules, restrictions and assumptions about 'bad behaviours'

- 4.2.5 A significant theme relates to the rules and restrictions in the home, and their inflexibility, and the negative assumptions made about young people when they were seen to resist these. In addition, the young people felt there was an immediate suspicion of or negative assumptions about them, and this meant that they were not listened to or understood. Labels attached to the young people and what they became 'known as' were seen as contributing to this – with a number of the young people describing themselves as being 'known for being violent' or 'known as a high risk'. As already detailed, the young people described the use of force by staff as a main response to behaviours, and of this leading to escalations of physical violence – both from the young people and staff. The young people felt that the focus was on their behaviours and there was an absence of attention to their needs. For example, all of the young people described finding it difficult to sleep at night and relying on the TV or use of the phone to help them to fall asleep. Night-time was also described as the most difficult time for them and the time when they might most need someone to reassure them and to talk to them. Yet, they described their doors being locked and alarmed, staff not wanting to speak to them, or being told by waking staff 'not to play up or wake them up'. A need for them was for staff to appreciate them as 'typical teenagers', while at the same time being skilled enough to understand when the young people were wanting help and needed to be listened to:

*"Well, basically I have this rule with my iPad. Where I have to give it in at a certain time. And I was going to bed quite early. And I'm not allowed a smartphone, so I was going to bed quite early. And then I gave like my iPad in, before I was supposed to. And then I got told that the person that I gave my iPad to thought I had a phone, because I gave my iPad in. I don't like stuff like that."*

Leon, 15.

*"When I was in that private residential, I was getting like, I don't know how to explain it. He was like pressurising me to go missing, getting into trouble, all that. I tried to speak to them [staff] about it. And they were like, oh, it's you doing it and all that. So, you're basically getting the blame for it. But they're not seeing the other side. So, I think they should see both sides before they hit on somebody. I feel like when they're, saying like they're running away, they're going to be running away for a reason. It's either somebody's not listening to what they're trying to say to them, or they, I don't even know. Something's happening in the home or something like that. It's not, it's not just because they were running away for fun, it's for some reason."*

Flo, 14.

## Behaviours as a coping response

- 4.2.6 Relatedly, all the young people described many instances of what they understood to be 'naughty' or 'bad' or problematic behaviours, that may even at times be harmful to themselves, as a response to rules or force, and to their needs and feelings, as a way of coping or being heard. For example, young people described 'going missing' to get some space, responding to restraints with increased violence, or actively damaging and being violent to property which then led to them being listened to and being moved. This is typified by the following from Lydia, who explains that patterns of responses to young people in care, in which their emotional needs or requests for help are rarely the instigator of changes for them, mean that young people learn that it is through violence to property or others, or engagement in 'high risk' behaviours, that there will be some form of action from staff or social services:

*“But I ended up having to get arrested to get out of that house. So I did criminal damage to the house to actually get out. Because it was affecting my life so much. And, you know, I even put myself in hospital beforehand because of it. And, you know, it was affecting me really much. And just no one was listening, so I was like, you know, this is your problem. And like, I even got sectioned, so it was just like all crazy. So, it was just like, you know, you can't be blaming me when I told you for help, and you didn't give it to me. And I think that's the biggest thing in care, like with placements, you just need to listen to kids. And if you don't, then you can't expect the unexpected from them. You can't expect them to be good. You can't expect them to be mentally okay in themselves. So I think that's the biggest thing... And I think a lot of kids, why they do get in trouble is because they feel like they have to be naughty to get what they want, or, you know, to get out, a replacement, or get what they want, like I said. And it's sad, but it's true.”*

*Lydia, 17.*

- 4.2.7 The young people perceived that the need for their OWR arrangements was the result of their behaviours, and because they were young people that staff and homes could not cope with or accommodate. Some of the young people understood this action to be their own fault. However, their narratives also indicate that they had unmet wellbeing and care and support needs, and this combined with the culture in the regulated homes which typically responded to behaviours first and not needs, creates a story that these young people are especially problematic. This may lead to care homes refusing to accept them. It may also be the case that regulated homes present an environment and workforce that may not always be suitable to keep these young people safe and to address their needs.

## **What care home provision should be like for children and young people in Wales**

- 4.3 This final section outlines the messages young people shared about what good care home provision should be like for children and young people in Wales. These messages follow on from the findings considered, above.

- 4.3.1 The young people want professional caring staff to listen to and support them. They want staff to understand what it means for young people to be reliant on them for their care, and for staff to be compassionate and kind to them, and concerned to ensure all their needs are met, not just their need to be safeguarded. ‘Professional’ in this context means staff who can set aside their own personal issues or struggles with the role, which may lead to some of the inappropriate actions or lack of engagement with young people detailed above, but not to be professional to the extent that they are then impersonal and unfeeling to young people.

*“These people have to be professional, but also, they understand the balance of treating me like another person and being professional.”*

*Jax, 16.*

*“So, good, a good carer, I'd say, obviously caring. Like easy to talk to. A good listener. I don't know how to explain it, but like they see every point of view. If that makes sense. And yeah, probably someone like that. Like understanding. Maybe just comfort as well. Like, yeah, and like, yeah, comfort... Like, probably like just (pause) and not multiple people as well, just one person that can come to you and just talk to you. But I would say that they are quite good with like the cup of tea, food, all that, yeah. But for me, it's like emotionally. Some of the staff here are really good with stuff like that, but like, some of them are like a bit more not as good as that... They just don't do it.*

*Because I don't like going up to people and like talking about it. I'd rather someone come up to me be like, are you okay type of thing. [Be] comforting. Soothing, like. Because obviously when you come into care, it's a lot, like it's not just like that, it's a lot."*

*Leon, 15.*

- 4.3.2 The young people's narratives indicate or explicitly refer to the importance of training for staff. They want staff to learn to see them as young people, and to be skilled enough to give a proportionate response to behaviours that in other contexts might be seen as 'typical'. They want staff able to respond to them in such a way that requires minimal verbal or physical force. Importantly, they want trained staff who are skilled in an understanding of young people's emotional needs and triggers, which can be at the root of their behaviours and their responses to staff and the care environment.

*"But they say trauma, there's triggers of this and this, but they doesn't say what the triggers could mean for each person. And they just need more training around the individual instead of the majority. Because they're training on majority when a lot of these kids are nothing like the majority. You've gone placement to placement to placement because you don't fit, you don't fit the majority. So, then you go into an unregulated, you still don't fit the placement, these guys ain't trained whatsoever, and then it's just a shitty cycle of, we don't like you, we can't work with you, oh my God, I'm worthless, I've tried to kill myself, we don't like you, we don't want to work with you. And it was a really bad cycle for ages... you need to start treating each kid as an individual, not a group. We're all different, we're not a piece of paper."*

*Gabe, 19.*

- 4.3.3 They want the focus of their care experience and responses they receive to be on support rather than on changing their behaviours. They particularly want help to deal with their emotions and mental health issues, and any reparations needed with, or ways of making sense of, their difficult relationships with family.

*"Cos like they change their behaviour maybe so then they can go back somewhere, like say go back to their normal care home, or go back home. I think they could maybe first like try to encourage them to try being a bit more (pause) like try and get things in place like people that can help, like maybe their social worker or someone. And if that don't work, maybe the last resort is changing them. But I think there's other ways to go round first. I think they should like offer support as well like if they think they need it. And like try and get them back to where they live maybe. Just someone to talk to, like maybe a good counsellor or something. Or (pause) yeah. Like maybe their social worker, or (pause) yeah."*

*Josie, aged 14.*

- 4.3.4 They want staff to understand the importance of routine and of being engaged in education, hobbies and other activities that help occupy their time. They need active encouragement with these, or staff to engage in activities with them or be there to accompany them. They want staff to understand the importance of food and mealtimes. They want healthy food, and they want 'treats' and comfort food that they are familiar with. They want staff to understand their need for connection to people, friends and family, and to help them to find ways to ensure this – particularly if they are unable to access their phones.

*"Like, with hobbies and things, like I reckon if I said like, I want to start knitting, the next day [the manager] has probably already ordered something to be delivered. Yeah, and [manager] is so supportive and amazing and desperate for you to do, for*

*that stuff. You can just ask her for something, and poof, you've practically got it."*  
Ruby, 15.

- 4.3.5 They want homes that are like 'typical' homes. They want there to be fewer locks on the doors, no restrictions on the use of the kitchen or oven and they do not want lots of institutional reminders on the walls that this is not a typical home. They do not want safety provisions to be at the expense of an environment that can feel like home.

*"The one thing I didn't like, the door's always locked. And like stuff screwed to the like wall, like paintings and mirrors. And it was just like, like, what is this? And like you find it in a lot of places. Like it's like, and I just think, you know, if you don't want people to like destroy it, then don't have it up at all. Because, you know, and like I don't see the point in locking doors. So I think, well, that's not homely at all. Like, you know, it just feels like, you know, we're being locked down, you know? Like we're literally in prison. Like, you know, everything's stuck. And it's just like, all like plastic mirrors you can get, so it's not proper glass. And I just think, I understand that in a way, but I just think that's a bit silly in a way. Because I think, you know, you go to a normal house or your house. Wouldn't have that at all. You'll be like, what the fuck? I wouldn't have that in my house. So it's just like, you know, obviously I understand locking the door, stuff like front door and back door, I get that 100%. But not every door in the house."*

Lydia, 17

- 4.3.6 The young people want homes that are located within communities, which are close to their friends and family, and are accessible to shops, public transport and places to walk. They want to be located in 'typical' streets. They do not want to feel like they have to be placed far away from people and communities.

*"we're in a community of people within this location, where usually we would be super far off into the mountains or the woods, like into wildlife-y areas. So being able to have the choice of being part of the community and the people surrounding you also gives more exposure to people in care."*

Jax, 16.

## 5. Summary and key messages

- 5.1 Findings indicate that young people have mixed experiences of OWR arrangements. The majority of these young people shared very positive views of these arrangements and stressed how important these homes have been for them and their wellbeing and possible future outcomes. They also shared some troubling experiences of poor care in these homes. However, it is also evident from these accounts that there are similarities between these experiences of OWRs and experiences of registered and regulated care arrangements. It is worth emphasising that the young people in these OWR arrangements were placed as such, due to the high complexity of their needs and behaviours. Yet with these higher levels of complexity, OWR provision was experienced positively, and in many cases was perceived to have led to significant positive changes and outcomes for the young people.
- 5.2 From these findings, the status of a care home arrangement being registered or unregistered does not seem to be a key marker of, or driver, for quality care experiences for children and young people. Key drivers for these children and young people are relationships with staff, the culture and environment in the home, and a sense of the provision being structured around their needs. It is troubling that the majority of these young people had concluded that it was an absence of regulation or registration that made their positive experiences of care possible. For these reasons, care provision is experienced very positively, when set up specifically with the unique needs of a child in mind, and operated by skilled and consistent staff, regardless of registration status. This finding, along with those relating to the poor care experiences within registered provision, speaks to the wider sector in terms of OWR provision, and to children's residential care more broadly. It may also present a need to consider the regulation and inspection frameworks for children's care home service provision.
- 5.3 The importance of staff is a thread running through all of the findings. Findings indicate that young people need trained and skilled people who will listen to them and actively seek out to engage with them in consideration of their emotional, social and other wellbeing needs. Importantly, findings indicate that children and young people need staff who can understand their needs to know how best to respond to their behaviours. This presents messages for the training residential staff receive and skills expected from those in these roles. It also suggests a need to consider ensuring or enabling access to more specialised trauma and children's rights-based training for staff.
- 5.4 It is important to note that OWR provision that was viewed negatively was, in most instances, principally because of young people's experiences with agency staff. Findings indicate a lack of skill amongst this workforce and a concerning standard and level of care provided for children and young people. The use of agency staff in OWR provision is particularly problematic, and these findings present messages regarding the staffing of this provision and the oversight afforded to young people while living in these homes. There are some similar findings, however, relating to staff care and support by both agency and non-agency staff in registered provision.
- 5.5 It is evident from these findings that there may be issues with a 'safety first' culture within residential care provision that prioritises safeguarding needs over other care, support and wellbeing needs. This is in terms of the provision itself, and the environment created for children and young people, including the location of the provision. This is also in relation to the responses given to young people and a cultural response that directs staff to a risk-based focus on managing behaviours. There are important messages here about the support provided to young people to meet their needs under the UNCRC rights framework. Findings also raise questions regarding the use of force and restraint towards young people. There may also be problems with the recording of incidents within care homes that focus on the

young person's behaviour and not the context around the incident. This type of recording may have resultant implications for children and young people in terms of how they are viewed by new staff familiarising themselves with the young person and their needs, and the potential limitations in provision due to providers being unwilling to accommodate them.

### **Limitations and final comments**

- 5.6 This was a small-scale qualitative study, and these findings should be understood within those terms: the report does not make conclusions and claims to generalisability made by larger representative studies designed with such a purpose. It instead provides consideration of an urgent and under-researched issue, by providing in-depth understanding of key perspectives and the experiences of those directly involved – young people, from across Wales, who have lived in OWR provision. In so doing, rich insights offered by the research give the grounds for findings to have resonance beyond this particular study.
- 5.7 These findings indicate that OWR provision can be experienced very positively, contributing to positive outcomes for young people. That being so, this report should not be read as being supportive of unregistered and unregulated provision as an alternative model for children's residential care. It is important to note such findings are as much about young people's (sometimes troubling) experiences of registered residential care as they are about OWR provision. Key findings relate to staff, and the care and support and attention to their needs that young people received (or not), and to the home environment itself. This research therefore presents important messages regarding staff recruitment, skills and training, the location and design of homes, and to cultures within homes and across the sector as they relate to risk, safeguarding, and the wellbeing of children and young people. This includes the capabilities of systems to hear and understand children's needs and perspectives. These messages therefore speak to the wider children's residential care sector, including children's services, regulatory authorities and regulation frameworks.

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