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ADSS Cymru

Leading Social Services in Wales

Yn arwain Gwasanaethau
Cymdeithasol yng Nghymru

Social Care in Wales: A picture for the Senedd

A briefing for Senedd Members
May 2026

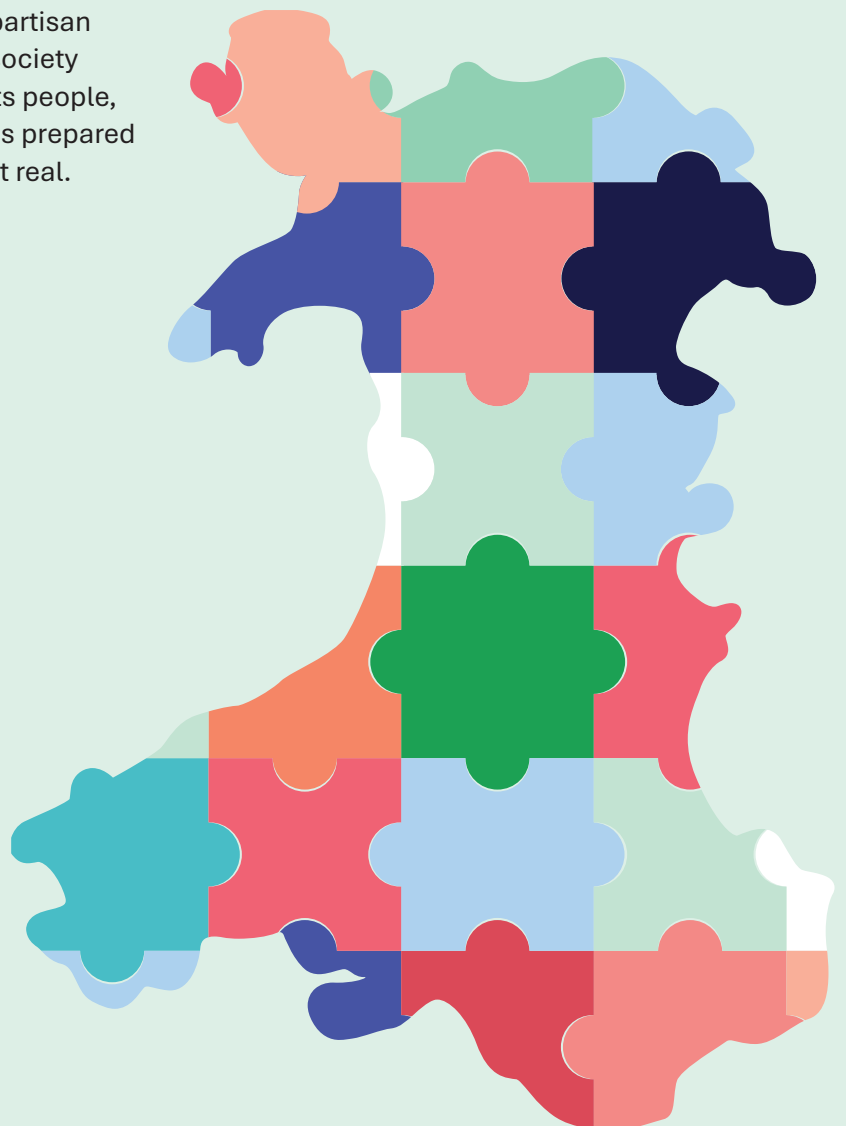


About ADSS Cymru

ADSS Cymru is the Association of Directors of Social Services in Wales, the professional leadership body for statutory directors, heads of service and senior managers of social services in all 22 Welsh local authorities. Our members hold collective statutory responsibility for social care across Wales: for children's services, adult services, safeguarding, commissioning and workforce.

We work in close partnership with the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA), Foster Wales, the National Adoption Service, The Children's Commissioning Consortium Cymru (4Cs), SOLACE Wales, Social Care Wales, Care Inspectorate Wales, the Welsh NHS Confederation, RCN Cymru, along with and the Offices of the Children's, Older People's and Future Generations Commissioners. We also have strong alliances with social care organisations across the UK and lead a highly acclaimed annual National Social Care Conference.

This paper is offered to all Senedd Members, across all political groups, as a shared initial evidence base. Social care is not a partisan issue. It is a question of the kind of society Wales wants to be: one that supports people, families and communities well and is prepared to invest in making that commitment real.



What Social Care is – and what it is not

Social care is frequently misunderstood. It is not simply a support service for older people, nor is it an extension of the NHS that steps in when hospitals are full. It is something more fundamental than both.

Social care enables people to live the lives they choose, with dignity, independence and connection to the communities they belong to. We work to protect and safeguard vulnerable people, to stay safe, connected and independent. The system supports children to thrive, helps families stay together where it is safe to do so, enables disabled adults to train, work and participate in their communities, supports unpaid carers to continue caring, and prevents crises that are far more costly in both human and financial terms.

The ‘social’ in social care is not incidental. It reflects a distinct value base, one that is about empowerment and independence rather than passive services people receive. It is about what people can contribute and what matters to them, rather than what services are available. It is as much about support and enabling as it is about care. Social care and health are complementary systems with different purposes. Conflating them or treating social care purely as a mechanism for relieving NHS pressure, misrepresents both.

Social care in Wales operates under the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 — progressive legislation that places the citizen at the centre, promotes choice, voice and control, and requires professionals and people who draw on care and support to work as equal partners. That legislative foundation is a genuine strength, and it is one that ADSS Cymru contributed to and is wholeheartedly committed to.

In collaboration with Welsh Government, Social Care Wales and the WLGA, we have produced this [short guide to social care in Wales](#). It provides a useful introduction to what social care is and how it is delivered and regulated.



The scale of Social Care in Wales

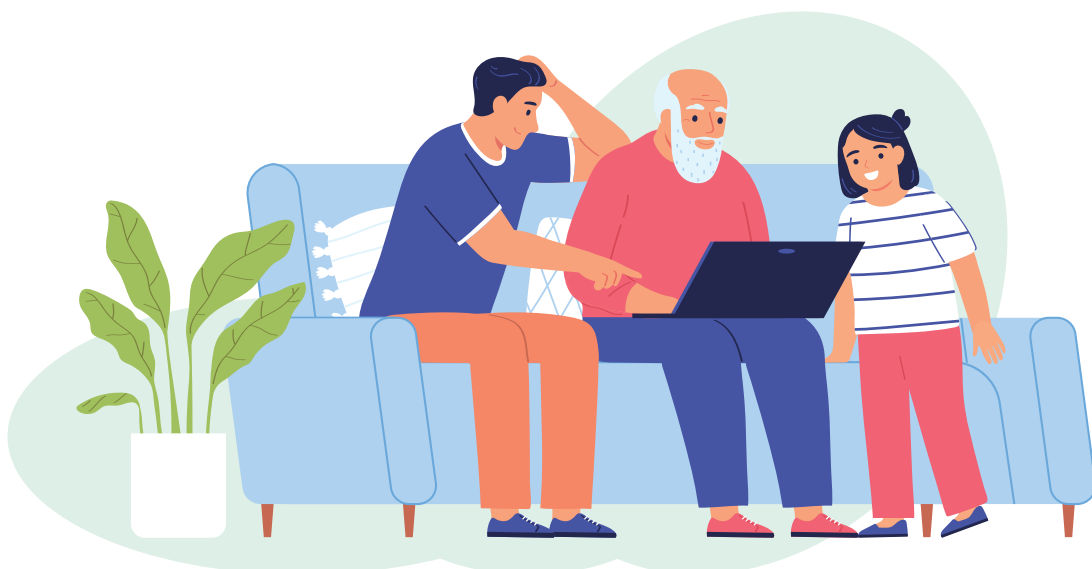
To understand what is at stake in the current debate about social care funding and reform, it helps to understand the scale of what the sector does every day.

The scale of social care in Wales is significant, touching the lives of tens of thousands of people and families across every community:

- Over 80,000 people in Wales live with a care and support plan.
- More than 60,000 adults have a care and support plan, with over 30% of them aged 85 or older.
- 37% of adults with a care and support plan receive domiciliary care.
- More than 7,000 children are looked after by local authorities in Wales.
- There are over 300,000 unpaid carers in Wales – many of which require their own care and support in addition to the people that they provide care for.

These figures reflect a sector that is delivering – often under severe pressure, and often without the recognition it deserves. Behind each statistic is a person: a child supported to stay with their family rather than enter care; an older person supported to remain at home rather than in hospital or residential care; a disabled adult enabled to work and live independently; an unpaid carer given the break that allows them to keep caring for their loved ones.

Social care also employs more than 80,000 people across Wales – making it one of the largest employers in the country, with a workforce present in every community, in every constituency.



A system under serious pressure

The same sector that delivers these outcomes is also facing financial and operational pressures that are structural, not cyclical, and that will intensify unless addressed.

The financial picture

The projected social services overspend for 2025–26 is £69 million, following overspends of £107 million in 2023–24 and £106 million in 2024–25. For 2026–27, the projected pressure rises to £201 million — 7.2% of net revenue expenditure — within a wider local government funding gap of £560 million. Social care accounts for 36% of that total.

These overspends are not the result of mismanagement. They are structural, driven by factors no Director of Social Services can address through efficiencies:

- Demographic demand is growing at pace. By 2038, one in four people in Wales will be over 65. Complex multi-morbidity, people living with two or more long-term conditions requiring co-ordinated care, is expected to almost double by 2035. Multi-morbidity also develops earlier in more deprived communities, meaning complex need is increasingly experienced by younger adults as well as older people.
- Increasing complexity means that every placement, assessment and care package costs more than it did a decade ago.
- Policy commitments, often the right ones, have added structural cost without structural funding, including National Insurance changes and Real Living Wage obligations.
- Pressures at the interface between health and social care are significant and under-recognised. Continuing Healthcare for both adults and children is applied inconsistently across Wales and where eligibility is interpreted narrowly, costs are having to be met by local authorities without corresponding funding.

Moreover, grant dependency has created a fragile preventative infrastructure.

The Auditor General for Wales has said some local authorities are at ‘the very edge of financial sustainability’. Most Directors of Social Services, when surveyed, rate their budgets as inadequate to meet current demand. None rates their funding as very adequate.



The Workforce

Wales has approximately 80,000 people working in regulated social care. Vacancy rates in social work run at 10–15%; in some frontline care roles they are higher still. High turnover, pay that has not kept pace with comparable public sector roles, and no consistent career pathways visible to those entering the profession are creating a sector in a near-permanent cycle of recruitment.



Pay differentials between social care and the NHS are actively depleting specialist capacity. Occupational Therapists (OTs), Approved Mental Health Professionals (AMHPs), nurses in social care and experienced social workers are moving to NHS roles for better pay and terms. Wales is, in effect, training specialists for the NHS at social care's expense.

ADSS Cymru is working with key partners to address some of the underlying issues, like developing a National Care Academy and creating proper pay and progression frameworks for the sector; however, recruitment and retention with the sector remains a challenge.

Children's Services

Children's services are under particular strain. Across Wales, Children's Services have developed enhanced family support to help prevent the need for children to come into care. However, with increasing societal and family pressures, not every child is able to live safely at home. The shortage of suitable placements for children with complex needs is the single most commonly identified driver of budgetary pressure. Some children require intensive staffing ratios costing up to £1 million per child annually. Delayed access to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Support (CAMHS) consistently drives escalation from mental health need into statutory social care crisis. Earlier investment by health in children's and young people's mental health would prevent much of this escalation and the lifelong human and financial costs that follow. Fostering sufficiency is declining across much of Wales.

The transition to not-for-profit children's residential care, under the Health and Social Care (Wales) Act 2025, is supported by ADSS Cymru and our members. Over 200 beds have been developed or are in development. However, the transition carries real workforce and financial risks that must be met with honest understanding and sustained investment.



The prevention imperative

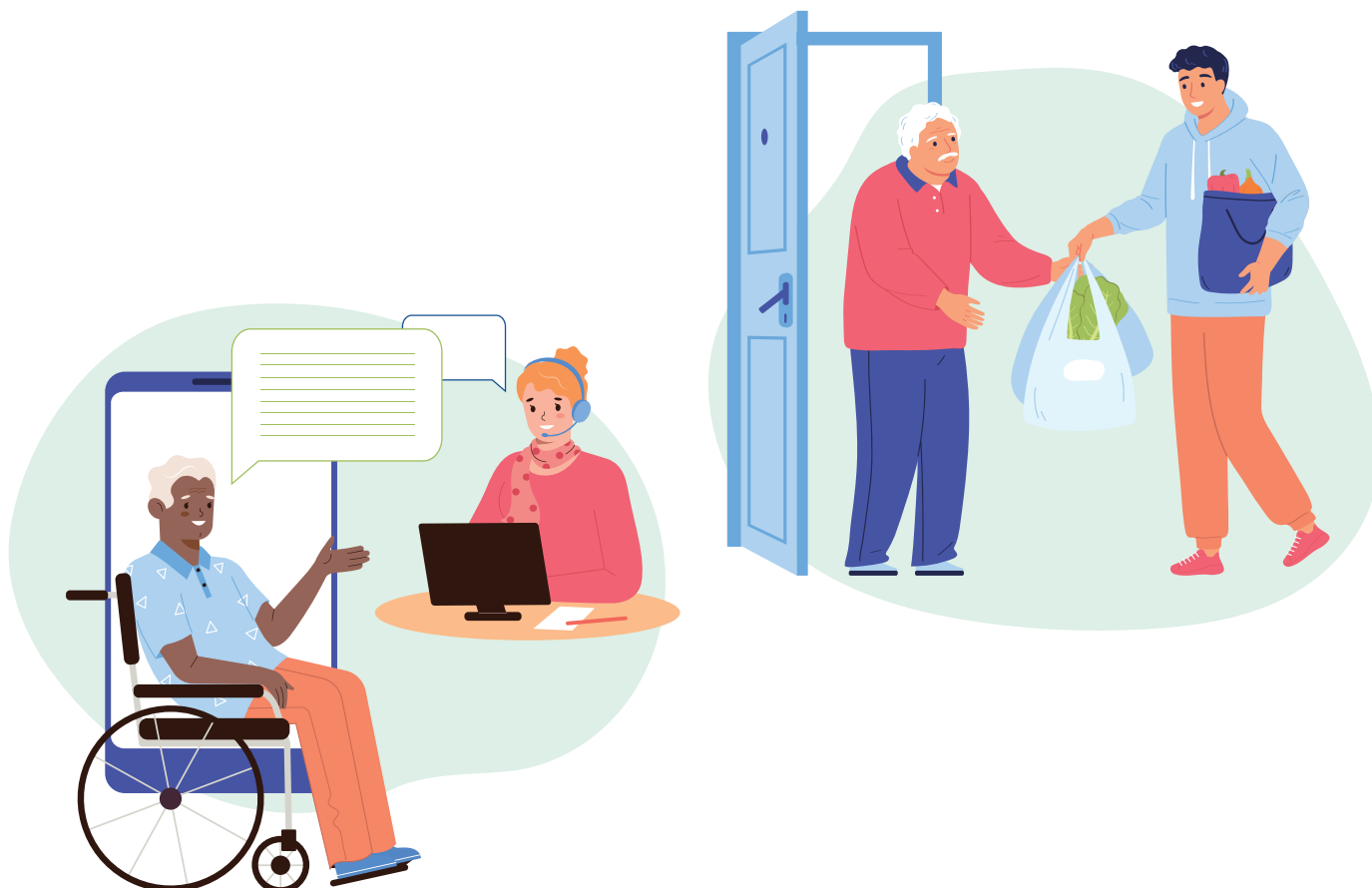
Across all parts of social care, the evidence is consistent: the most powerful and cost-effective interventions happen early, long before crisis. Even within some of the most complex situations, social care maintains its emphasis on preventative-focused interventions that help to reduce risk and develop sustainable solutions.

Yet prevention is chronically underfunded and the services that deliver it are the first to be cut when budgets are under pressure, precisely because they are not statutory in the same way as crisis response.

Every £1 invested in adult social care in Wales returns £2.78 in socioeconomic benefits. Prevention services, day opportunities, family support, respite, community wellbeing, are not a cost. They are an investment that reduces the far larger cost of reactive, crisis-driven intervention.

Wales has approximately 370,000 unpaid carers, the backbone of the care system. Their ability to sustain caring roles depends on the short breaks, respite services and community support that budgetary pressures have significantly reduced.

Local government is uniquely placed to drive a whole-system approach to prevention, bringing together housing, leisure, education, transport and primary care around shared goals of wellbeing and community connection. This is the argument for keeping social care rooted in local government: local authorities know their communities, hold the relationships and can convene across systems in ways that national or regional bodies cannot.



What this means for Senedd Members

Every constituency in Wales contains people who draw on social care and a workforce that delivers it every day. Social care is a skilled profession, but it is not a niche concern. It is a universal service that most people will need at some point in their lives. It is a vital part of many community economies across Wales.



The ADSS Cymru Seventh Senedd Briefing Series sets out our detailed priorities across six themes: sustainable funding; prevention and community wellbeing; transforming services for children, families and adults; digital transformation; workforce; and safeguarding for electively home educated children. Each briefing makes a specific ask and points to a specific opportunity. This paper is the umbrella beneath which those detailed arguments sit.

Understanding the national picture is a starting point. However, social care is, at its heart, a local service, shaped by local need, delivered through local relationships and accountable to local communities. The most powerful way for a Senedd Member to understand it is to see, sense and experience it.



Our invitation to you

Engage with your local authority social services teams

Every Senedd constituency boundary overlaps with one or more of Wales's 22 local authorities. The statutory directors, heads of service and senior operational managers within those authorities hold the detailed picture of what social care looks like in your area, the pressures they face, the innovative approaches they are developing and what better support from Welsh Government and the Senedd would make possible.

ADSS Cymru warmly invites all Senedd Members to make contact with the Directors of Social Services in the local authorities within their constituencies. We can facilitate those introductions.

See frontline services in your community

No briefing paper, including this one, can substitute for seeing social care in practice. We encourage every Senedd Member to visit frontline services in their area: a residential care home for adults or older people; a domiciliary care team; a day service for people with learning disabilities; a family support hub; a reablement service supporting people home from hospital. The range and reach of what social care does is genuinely not understood until it is seen.

Speak to people with lived experience

Above all, we encourage you to speak to people who draw on care and support and to those who provide it as unpaid carers. Their experience is the most direct and honest account of what the social care system is for, what it achieves as well as where it might be falling short. The Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 places their voice at the centre of every decision. It should be at the centre of Senedd scrutiny too.

ADSS Cymru is ready to support Senedd Members across all political groups to engage with social care in their areas. Whether that is facilitating introductions to local authority Directors of Social Services, helping to arrange service visits, or providing evidence for committee work, we are here to help.

For further information:

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adss.cymru