



# Edge of Care briefing

by Amy Bainton  
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Believe in  
children  
 Barnardo's  
Cymru

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# What is the problem?

Over the last 15 years the number of looked after children in Wales has increased by 34%, and Wales has the highest rate of looked after children in the UK nations.

Latest statistics show that in Wales:



**7,270**

children were in local authority care as of March 2022<sup>1</sup>



**3,868**

children were placed on the Child Protection Register in 2020/21<sup>2</sup>



**16,580**

children were receiving care and support from local authorities in 2020<sup>3</sup>

*The Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act* highlights that there is a need to support families to stay together, where this is safe and in the best interests of the child.

This data demonstrates that the need for edge of care support – for those families where there is a risk that a child could be taken into care – is growing and complex.

Welsh Government has committed in the Programme for Government<sup>4</sup> to investing in specialist support for children on the edge of care with complex needs and has an ambition to work to keep more children safely within families and avoid being taken into local authority care.

It is important to recognise that it is right for some children to come into care. However, we believe that there is more we can do to identify and support families to safely support children without the need for care proceedings. There should also be a focus on providing some families whose children have been taken into care with support to make the changes required so that they can be safely reunified with their children.

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1 <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Health-and-Social-Care/Social-Services/Childrens-Services/Children-Looked-After/childrenlookedafterat31march-by-localauthority-gender-age>

2 <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Health-and-Social-Care/Social-Services/Childrens-Services/Service-Provision/childrenonchildprotectionregister-by-localauthority-categoryofabuse-agegroup>

3 <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Health-and-Social-Care/Social-Services/Childrens-Services/children-receiving-care-and-support/childrenreceivingcareandsupport-by-localauthority-agegroup>

4 <https://gov.wales/programme-for-government-update>

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# What should edge of care support look like?

## *Service spotlight: Baby & Me, Newport*

Baby & Me is an innovative project borne out of the Newport City Council and Barnardo's Cymru Partnership which provides intense pre- and post-natal support for families where there is a risk that a baby would be taken into care at birth. The service brings together health, social services, and parenting support into one holistic model that has delivered excellent results.

Baby & Me was developed in 2019 and provides a package of support which includes bespoke 1:1 support, a six-week group antenatal parenting programme called "Baby Steps" and a Family Group Conference<sup>5</sup> where appropriate. Baby & Me works with parents to create a safe space for families to explore their identified issues and use a range of strategies and therapeutic approaches to work empathically with parents and empower them to reach their goals of keeping their family together.

Baby & Me uses a relationship-based approach, to work with families in a flexible, trauma informed way. The service is a collaboration between health (midwifery, mental health services and health visiting teams) and social care. This promotes health messages with the purpose of improving health outcomes for both parents and babies. Practitioners recognise the pressures of parenting alongside child protection processes and facilitate engagement with wider services such as substance misuse, housing, mental health etc, to support parents to overcome barriers to successful parenting.

- Since its inception in 2019, there has been a 48% reduction in care proceedings issued at birth, equating to 20 fewer babies coming into care in Newport compared to the two years prior to the beginning of the service.
- Of the babies who have gone home, 100% had been deregistered from the Child Protection Register by one year old.
- Baby & Me families spend less time on the Child Protection Register in their first year of life than comparative babies.
- ***"I actually feel like I've been seen for me as person and the person I am now, not everything that happened in the past. I don't feel like I've been judged by what's happened in the past"*** – Parent feedback

**Recommendation:** Barnardo's Cymru believes that this level of support should be available to families across Wales and would urge Welsh Government to support the expansion of Baby & Me and other models which are successfully supporting families to remain together safely.

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<sup>5</sup> Family Group Conferences (FGC's) are voluntary decision-making meetings to help families find their own solutions to problems. A FGC can help any family to deal with the problems they are facing and create solutions together. In the FGC process, the family takes the lead in the discussion and chooses solutions that work for them.

# Invest in early intervention and prevention

For countless families, early intervention is key. When action can be taken early enough, many issues can be dealt with earlier and before they have potentially escalated.

Social Care Wales state that *“tackling poverty and building community resilience with services aimed at keeping families together helps to reduce the numbers of children entering care.”*<sup>6</sup>

The benefits of early intervention are well-established and there are many programmes and services embodying this across Wales. However, for early intervention to be effective, it must be invested in.

**Service Spotlight: RCT Resilient Families, Rhondda**<sup>7</sup> is commissioned under Families First co-ordination to provide family support across Rhondda Cynon Taf as part of the authority’s family support offer. It provides the co-ordination of support to children, young people and families in need of assistance to prevent escalation of need and risk. Operating a key worker model, the service works with vulnerable families to improve wellbeing outcomes. In recent years, this service has experienced significant increased demand both in terms of numbers<sup>8</sup>

but also in higher levels of need and risk to children and young people<sup>9</sup>. The reality of this is that early intervention and prevention services are creeping towards providing edge of care work, which creates a need for Welsh Government to consider how to fund support across the continuum of needs.

**Service spotlight: Cardiff Young Families Supported Housing**<sup>10</sup> provides housing and parenting support for vulnerable young families where the primary carer is aged 16-21 years (at move in) and is either pregnant or has children. The service uses a trauma informed approach to support young parents to gain the necessary skills, knowledge, and awareness to live more independently in their communities, to manage a tenancy and to raise their children to have a secure, healthy and happy childhood.

**Service spotlight: Cyfle: Family Life Skills Service, Denbighshire**, provides early support to families and works to ensure they are assisted to address a variety of needs. The service engages and works with families who have children aged 0-18, offering bespoke support in several ways, including direct work with parents/carers and children, group work, and signposting to other agencies.

**Recommendation:** A consultation exercise should be undertaken by Welsh Government with the children’s social care sector (including voluntary/third sector providers) on what early intervention services should look like, understanding the challenges facing the sector and what future priorities should be. Early intervention services are under considerable strain, and Welsh Government must take informed steps to tackle this.

Welsh Government should consider an Early Intervention and Prevention Strategy which would draw on good practice and the pressures and difficulties facing early intervention services, and plan for a sustainable future for these services.

6 <https://socialcare.wales/service-improvement/safely-reducing-the-need-for-children-to-enter-care#section-34029-anchor>

7 <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/what-we-do/services/rct-resilient-families#:~:text=About%20this%20service,e.g.%20schools%20and%20health%20care>

8 During 2021-2022 the Service received a total of 213 new referrals – an increase of 64% and engaged with 330 families, an increase of 42% on the previous year

9 The number of children and young people referred with a mental health need has risen by 40% on the previous year.

10 <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/what-we-do/services/cardiff-supported-housing-young-families>

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# Delivering sustainable change and working with families for ‘as long as it takes’

For many reasons, sustainability is a key issue in edge of care services.

Sustainability of funding is a key component in delivering innovative edge of care services. Much is gained by investing in the time to build a trusting relationship with families. Some of the most successful work of Barnardo’s Cymru is based on a commitment to building trust. Losing services – and therefore losing trusted and skilled workers – creates instability for families and for services themselves.

Services face issues related to short contracts of 12 or 24 months, which do not allow much time to embed a service within a community or for staff to build rapport with families. This can create an unstable working environment for staff who may feel forced to leave for a more secure position.

Services also need to be able to establish effective working models and to demonstrate success.

**Service spotlight: Breaking the Cycle, Swansea:** Barnardo’s Cymru Swansea Children Matter Service gained Big Lottery Fund support to deliver an intensive family support service between 2016-2019. The service was designed with, and had the full support of, the City and County of Swansea Child and Family Services. The aim of the project was to provide intensive support to families to break the cycle of intergenerational issues by improving family functioning, lifestyle choices, engagement, and aspirations.

One of the foundational features of this service was that it was designed to work with families ‘for as long as it takes’, which was recognised by families as being an important part of the intervention. Increasingly, interventions are time limited, which creates additional challenges in developing relationships with families and helping to develop long-lasting change within the family.



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**Breaking the Cycle** is also an example of the need to work with the whole family, rather than working in isolation with one family member. This cuts down siloes and helps to navigate the dynamic of the family as a whole, as part of supporting long-term changes.

*Breaking the Cycle* achieved significant success with families:

- Only 2 families from Swansea out of 44 were referred back into Child and Family Services for statutory intervention post-support.<sup>11</sup>
- Parent feedback: ***“Social Services protect children and so they are limited in what they can do. You reach their expectations, and they pull out but that doesn’t get to the root of the problems. They are there to protect children. Barnardo’s looked at it with me, the reasons why things were happening and how to come out of the situation. They are there for the long term.”***
- 79% of families stated that support from *Breaking the Cycle* had improved their lives.<sup>12</sup>

**Recommendation:** Welsh Government should work with the children’s social care sector to develop a sustainable funding platform that will deliver innovation and excellence for children in Wales, whilst maintaining what works. This should be co-produced with children and young people, families, and local authorities to ensure that the voices of service users are central to the future of our services. Services should also have a built-in uplift throughout the course of the contract, as well as allowing for the financial room that is required to innovate, just to keep up with inflation.

Additionally, future services should be designed to provide maximum support and impact with families. There should also be flexibility to ensure that families can easily and quickly be referred back into services where necessary.

Services should also be empowered to work with the whole family. Working with one family member in isolation does not address complex family dynamics in the same way. Multi-agency working is also key – often the problems a family faces require coordination of multiple services and offering a holistic service is key.

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<sup>11</sup> *Breaking the Cycle* – an intensive family support intervention to reduce the need for future Social Services involvement

<sup>12</sup> *Breaking the Cycle* – an intensive family support intervention to reduce the need for future Social Services involvement

# Systems change and a partnership approach

Partnership working between local authorities and third sector providers benefits from the expertise within both organisations, and it creates the space to innovate and deliver for families based on their needs.

This enables us to develop models of specialist support and to tailor our responses to the needs of families and their children.

How it works:



**Service Spotlight: Newport City Council and Barnardo's Cymru Partnership** was established in 2011 and provides innovative responses to challenges facing families in Newport, particularly those on the edge of care. Under the umbrella of the Family Support Service, interventions include Baby & Me, the Rapid Response team that works with older children and teenagers on the edge of care, Lifelong Links<sup>13</sup>, and Family Group Conferencing. This strategic partnership is constantly evolving through the identification of existing or potential areas of development through a wide range of learning processes including co-production with young people and families, thematic case audits, internal research, transparent reporting, and a collective desire to provide innovative solutions in meeting the needs of children and families.

- 100% of families said that they would recommend Family Support Service to other families
- The Rapid Response service has supported 91% (65) of children and young people to remain at home.

There is a key cultural difference that is seen in a strategic partnership which is built upon collaborative responsibility between the local authority and third sector partner, where both partners recognise the benefits of investing to save and working collaboratively towards a common goal.

**Recommendation:** Welsh Government should encourage increased partnership working between local authorities and third sector providers in Wales, to deliver on the ambition to be home to the most innovative and effective interventions in children's services.

<sup>13</sup> Lifelong Links is a model developed by the Family Rights group to ensure a child has a positive support network around them to help them during their time in care and into adulthood. In Newport, our use of Lifelong Links resulted in a young person having an average of 4 connections at the beginning of the process, and an average of 12 connections at the end.

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# What edge of care interventions can achieve – Abbie’s story<sup>14</sup>

Abbie had experienced domestic abuse between her parents since she was six years old; she saw her mother get injured by her father and was at times caught in the middle as she tried to intervene. As Abbie got older, she started to skip school and go missing from home. Often, Abbie was travelling from Wales to England with adult males who had histories of criminal offences and would sexually exploit her in exchange for drugs and alcohol.

When she was 15 years old, Abbie became involved with a Barnardo’s Child Sexual Exploitation worker, Katie, who built a strong and positive relationship with Abbie. Abbie trusted Katie enough to disclose that her father was threatening to send her abroad to marry a family member because of her behaviour at home.

A Forced Marriage Protection Order and Emergency Protection Order was granted by the court and Abbie went to live with foster carers to keep her safe. Sadly, Abbie struggled with this move and was regularly absconding from her foster home and gravitating back home to her mother. After a significant amount of support and intervention, it was assessed as safe for Abbie to reside back at home with her mother while criminal orders prevented her father from coming to the home and seeing Abbie.

At 16 years old, Abbie settled into a new relationship with Adam. Upon finding out they were expecting their first child, Abbie and Adam were referred to the Baby & Me Service to support them to transition to parenthood and safely care for their baby. Abbie and Adam attended the Baby Steps antenatal parenting programme where they learned about the importance of early

years, babies’ brain development and how to read and respond to their babies’ emotional needs. They loved the group environment and showed real excitement and investment in becoming parents.

As Abbie became increasingly attached to her unborn baby, her risk-taking behaviours lessened. She stopped taking hard drugs, got into healthy routines, and always made sure she attended her midwifery appointments. The change in Abbie’s lifestyle and attitudes meant that Social Workers felt confident that Abbie and Adam could care for their baby with a package of support in place from Baby & Me. So, when baby Mila was born in October 2021 Abbie and Adam were able to take her home; a huge achievement that they worked incredibly hard for.

The preparations made by Abbie and Adam resulted in a smooth birthing journey, and workers noted just how connected, attuned, and sensitive they were as parents. Abbie has maintained breastfeeding Mila since birth and Adam is besotted by his little princess, using his familiar voice to sing to and soothe her. Baby Mila is thriving, showing reassuring signs that her parents have made her the centre of their world and are laying the foundations for healthy physical, social, emotional, and cognitive outcomes.

Abbie’s experience is valuable because statistically the odds were stacked against her. Research has found that 1 in 4 babies adopted in Wales are born to a mother who herself has grown up in care,<sup>15</sup> meaning that as a care-experienced young person Abbie was more likely to be at risk of having her baby removed and adopted. With the right support, provided in a timely manner, care-experienced young people can be fantastic parents.

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<sup>14</sup> Names in this story have been changed to protect identities

<sup>15</sup> When young people in and leaving state care become parents: what happens and why? Dr Louise Roberts, Cardiff University <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/123919/1/Roberts.%20Louise%20When%20young%20people%20in%20and%20leaving%20state%20care%20become%20parents.pdf>



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# Conclusion

The current trajectory of the number of children at risk of significant harm and requiring interventions is unprecedented. Something needs to change.

There is evidence that early intervention, and specific strategic interventions have worked by safely supporting families to stay together. However, provision across Wales is patchy and Barnardo's urges Welsh Government to ensure that families have access to specialist, early support wherever they live. Furthermore, schemes that do exist more widely require sustainable, long-term funding to ensure that they can build relationships with families and continue to deliver in the long-term.

We have seen extraordinary success where investment is made in forming Partnership arrangements to support families with complex issues.

We need to work together to prevent unnecessary care admissions, providing the right support for every child and family.

## About Barnardo's Cymru

Barnardo's Cymru has been working with children, young people and families in Wales for over 100 years and is one of the largest children's charities. We currently run more than 60 diverse services across Wales, working in partnership with local authorities. Each year we regularly support more than 10,000 children, young people and families. We aim to secure better outcomes for more children by providing the support needed to ensure stronger families, safer childhoods and positive futures. We use the knowledge gained from our direct work to campaign to improve the lives of children, young people and families by promoting positive change in policy and practice. We believe that with the right help, committed support and belief all children can fulfil their potential.



## How can you help?

Get in touch with us to learn more about edge of care services, visit a local service and find out about our other work in your area.

Support our recommendations for edge of care services in the Senedd.

## For more information

Contact Amy Bainton on  
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