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Social Care **Wales**

# The experiences and outcomes of children and young people from Wales receiving Secure Accommodation Orders

A report for Social Care Wales written by CASCADE, Cardiff University

**Summary version**



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## The experiences and outcomes of children and young people from Wales receiving Secure Accommodation Orders

Social Care Wales commissioned a project to explore the experiences of children and young people from Wales who received Secure Accommodation Orders between 1 April 2016 and 31 March 2018.

### Introduction

Children and young people aged 10 to 17 from England and Wales can be placed in secure accommodation anywhere in the UK. Children and young people can enter secure accommodation via the youth justice system or because they were subject to a court order for welfare reasons, but this report only looks at the experiences of children and young people who have been referred for welfare reasons.

The lives of many children and young people who are referred to secure accommodation are characterised by:

- neglect
- abuse
- family dysfunction
- insecure attachments
- bereavement
- relationship difficulties.

Most of their families have been known to social services for a long time, and although the children and young people are in care when secure accommodation is considered, many were with their families for years and entered care at a relatively late stage.

When in local authority care, the children and young people who were eventually referred to secure accommodation tended to experience emotional, peer and behavioural problems, and display hyperactivity. These complications often disrupt placements and result in multiple moves. The time leading up to secure accommodation is often characterised by an increase in high-risk or anti-social behaviours.

The average length of stay for children and young people placed in secure accommodation for welfare reasons is four to five months. During this time, the children and young people were offered additional services, with education and mental health support particularly important. While in secure accommodation some children and young people do well, others do not.

In the short term, secure accommodation can keep children and young people safe, engage them, provide them with stability, and identify some causes of high-risk behaviour. Longer-term outcomes are mixed as progress is not always sustained, and an initial short settled period, followed by some deterioration, is a common but not universal outcome.

## Methods

This project wanted to get a better understanding of the experiences of children and young people from Wales before, during and after their time in secure or alternative accommodation. We paid particular interest to:

- the children and young people's life histories
- how well the children and young people's needs and behaviours were supported and influenced by the nature and therapeutic model of the secure accommodation settings currently available
- how decisions and plans were made for children and young people following a period in secure accommodation
- the outcomes and stability of the children and young people's placements after leaving secure accommodation
- the emotional and physical well-being of the children and young people after leaving secure accommodation
- what happened when Secure Accommodation Orders were given, but alternative accommodation was provided because there were no beds available in secure accommodation.

To gather this information, we identified and examined relevant local authority data, and carried out interviews with:

- 11 children and young people who had used secure accommodation during the project's timeframe
- 30 social workers
- 12 other professionals involved in their care
- a foster carer
- a family member.

## Key findings

### Children and young people from Wales's use of secure accommodation

- during the project's timeframe, 21 out of 22 Welsh local authorities applied for Secure Accommodation Orders
- 56 Secure Accommodation Orders, involving 43 different children and young people, were given
- more than half the orders resulted in children and young people being placed in secure accommodation outside Wales
- less than a quarter were placed in settings that solely catered for those placed in secure accommodation on welfare grounds
- girls and boys were equally likely to enter secure accommodation based on welfare grounds.

### Children and young people's experiences before they were placed in secure accommodation

- most of the children and young people had been part of chaotic families and had been affected by abuse and/or neglect
- most of the families were known to social services, but few received sustained interventions
- all the children and young people had been in care – many entered comparatively late and some progressed to secure accommodation within months of entering care
- most of the children and young people experienced frequent care moves and were quickly placed in secure accommodation
- frequent care moves and subsequent difficulties finding new placements caused anxiety for the children and young people, and impacted heavily on social service resources
- the risk factors leading up to Secure Accommodation Orders included a mix of absconding, substance misuse, grooming, child sexual exploitation and self-harm

- while mental health problems, self-harm and suicide attempts were common among the children and young people before they were placed in secure accommodation, few received support from mental health services.

### **Children and young people's experiences of going into secure accommodation**

- while the challenge of keeping the children and young people informed and involved in the process of gaining Secure Accommodation Orders was evident, the views and opinions of some of the children and young people were not considered
- a lack of secure accommodation beds caused uncertainty and anxiety for the children and young people, and increased the workload of social services staff
- the lack of secure accommodation beds saw some local authorities creating alternative accommodation for the children and young people in unregistered settings
- the current methods of transport to and from the secure accommodation settings did not ensure the children and young people had safe and acceptable journeys.

### **Life in secure accommodation**

- poor experiences on arrival at the secure accommodation setting negatively affected the children and young people's attitudes to the rest of their stay
- secure accommodation can provide a consistent, regulated environment in which children and young people feel safe and engage with services they have previously been absent from, particularly education
- children and young people placed in secure accommodation for welfare reasons often disliked the custodial nature of some settings and felt it was inappropriate. They also felt living with children and young people admitted via the youth justice system was inappropriate

- secure accommodation tended to focus on containing children and young people, rather than providing them with the necessary specialised help
- Secure Accommodation Orders often gave insufficient time for therapeutic intervention or to lay the foundation for a positive trajectory
- more wide-ranging therapeutic treatment options that focus on behavioural and emotional, as well as psychological, problems are needed
- the care provided in secure accommodation seldom recognised and addressed the factors causing problematic behaviour, but rather provided containment and immediate, often temporary, de-escalation of risk.

### **Leaving secure accommodation**

- social workers recognised the importance of carefully planned transitions from secure accommodation
- when the length of a Secure Accommodation Order was uncertain, planning exits was challenging
- on leaving secure accommodation, the children and young people's histories and needs often made finding placements difficult, delayed their exit, and led to applications for deprivation of liberty orders for use in their new placements
- careful transition out of secure accommodation, with regular contact before leaving between the children and young people and their new placement, made the process easier
- approximately 38 per cent of the children and young people involved in the project had positive experiences in their first home after secure accommodation. A similar number had poor experiences and 25 per cent a mix
- those with good experiences tended to have carefully planned transitions into consistent homes that recognised and met their needs.

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## Longer-term experiences and outcomes

- most children and young people continued along the positive, negative or mixed trajectories begun on leaving secure accommodation
- in the longer term, the majority of post-secure placements were unable to adequately meet the needs of the children and young people
- between leaving secure accommodation and the time of this study, more than a quarter of the children and young people were given additional Secure Accommodation Orders. Other children and young people entered the criminal justice system or moved to a secure psychiatric placement
- positive outcomes appeared linked to placement quality. Consistent relationships with key adult(s) and sufficient mental health support were vital.

## Discussion: What are the problems?

Although most of the study's children and young people were known to social services at some point before they entered care, the lack of provision of sustained, targeted intervention raises questions about early intervention policy and practice. This includes the role of education, health and third sector agencies in recognising the need for extra support when required.

When this small and vulnerable group of children and young people entered care, their placements were unable to provide the care and support necessary, and most of them experienced multiple moves before secure accommodation. For many children and young people, this pattern was repeated after secure accommodation. In the context of the outcomes of children and young people referred to secure accommodation, this is an important issue because placement instability has been linked to fewer opportunities to develop secure attachments, an increase in emotional and behavioural problems, placement breakdown and feelings of rejection.

The residences that provide care to children who are looked after in England and Wales consist of statutory, private and third sector establishments, which leads to market forces playing a part in placement difficulties as some homes refuse to admit children and young people with poor histories. This, together with the need to ensure children and young people are not placed with others likely to exacerbate unwanted behaviour, further complicates placement issues.

In response, some local authorities resorted to creating 'bespoke' unregulated placements. While this breaches the law around residential care, many of these placements led to positive outcomes for the children and young people, and we should consider the possibility that these placements are effective, as they are built around supporting the children and young people to achieve their personal outcomes in a way impossible elsewhere.

The difficult stories of the children and young people were interspersed with accounts of professional involvement, where the crucial role of the social worker was evident. The time and associated costs social workers spent finding placements and visiting

children and young people when placed far from home was clear, as was the impact on other services, especially the health service, the police and the courts.

Of concern was the impact the process of obtaining and implementing a Secure Accommodation Order had on children and young people. Generally, negative experiences were linked to the circumstances surrounding the process of Secure Accommodation Order applications, transportation to secure accommodation, and the custodial nature and atmosphere of some secure accommodation settings.

The experiences of the children and young people who fared best after being placed in secure accommodation strengthen this study's calls for:

- careful transitions from secure accommodation to suitable placements
- giving attention to the relationships formed between children and young people, and residential staff
- recognising the need to provide interactions and activities that can be adapted to support children and young people to achieve their personal outcomes.

The study also supports wider findings suggesting that good outcomes for children and young people who enter secure accommodation can be attributed to appropriate consistent placements and service provision on leaving secure accommodation, rather than what happened while inside.

The current inability of mental health services to address the emotional and behavioural needs of most children and young people before and after secure accommodation suggests a need for mental health support to meet the emotional, behavioural, as well as psychological, needs of the children and young people. Allied to this is the finding that social workers often have deep understanding of the mental health of the children and young people they work with, suggesting that involving social workers in recognising children and young people's mental health needs, and ensuring appropriate mental health support is provided is likely to have a positive effect.

## Recommendations: What can be done?

Based on the project's findings and discussion above, we recommend:

- developing and using a national commissioning strategy that ensures local authorities can provide care to meet the high, often escalating needs of children and young people at any point. Any strategy should be underpinned by the necessary regional development to allow for its facilitation
- care placements should employ a model of therapy that's most likely to meet the needs of these children and young people across foster or residential care
- foster carers and residential child care workers looking after children and young people with high levels of need before and after secure accommodation should receive further training. This training should make sure there's consistency in the care provided and that the care can be adapted to meet the specific outcomes of every child and young person
- providing accessible support for carers during placements
- with many children and young people not receiving sufficient and/or appropriate mental health support before, during or after secure accommodation, there is a need for an additional level of service. This service needs to be able to overcome the barriers created by current mental health service criteria (for example, diagnosis of mental illness, immediate service engagement, living in secure accommodation) and ensures children and young people have access to support and treatment for behavioural and emotional problems, as well as specific mental illnesses
- social workers' knowledge of these children and young people's histories and needs suggests using a multi-agency, co-commissioning approach to mental health service provision. This approach would lead to a more informed referral process and help develop a service model that can better meet the trauma-based therapy needs of children and young people
- a national drive to bring together best practice in applying for Secure Accommodation Orders to make sure children and young people, and social workers have the support they need during this process. Where possible and safe, children and young people should be aware of Secure Accommodation Order applications, given the opportunity to attend proceedings, and their opinions should be sought and considered with the help of advocacy, if desired or needed
- the system is revised to make sure the positive effects of education, health services and therapy accessed in secure accommodation are sustained by providing comparable support and therapy on leaving. To ensure there's a seamless transition into the best possible care on leaving secure accommodation, develop a national integrated, multi-agency, co-commissioning approach to planning transition out of secure accommodation
- the austere environment of many secure accommodation settings is disliked and viewed as inappropriate by many children and young people placed on welfare grounds. In light of additional findings that some secure accommodation settings offer more home-like environments, we call for collaborative work with children and young people to improve the look and feel of the settings they are placed in as far as possible
- being placed far from home has a negative impact on children and young people, their families and local authorities as it makes regular contact difficult and expensive. Every effort should be made to place children and young people as close to home as possible.