



# **Voices From Care Cymru: Manifesto for the Senedd Elections 2026**

# Introduction from the CEO

Care experienced children and young people in Wales are clear that they want to see actual and immediate change in the services that are there to support them.

The kind of changes that they call for are doable, practical and deliverable within the next Senedd.

They call for the limited, safe and regulated use of restraint practices, for strong workforce arrangements, for continuity of care, and for comprehensive support for young people as they develop their independence.

These calls are consistent with principles set out in the Waterhouse Report – it may be 25 years since its publication but we have still to turn these principles into practice in Wales. Now is the time.

Young people continue to report barriers to high-quality and truly independent advocacy. Inspection outcomes are far too uneven across Wales. We need systemic, proactive, responsive, and robust oversight mechanisms that do not rely solely on the courage of individual children but which are part of an established programme of continuous improvement and clear accountability.

Lasting change in the nature and quality of services for children and young people will only be achieved when care experienced children and young people are fully engaged in shaping it. Welsh Government's Radical Reform Summits, delivered by Voices From Care Cymru, are one powerful example of this engagement that we believe must continue.

Each idea in the manifesto is an opportunity to strengthen this engagement of children and young people in decisions that affect them. Delivering them requires sustained commitment from both government and civil society to maintain the institutions that make children and young people's participation possible.

What we are asking for is no more than any child has a right to – the right to lead a decent life, as part of a decent society. We are not asking for more than any other child or young person has a right to but we are asking for the government to take very seriously their special responsibility as corporate parents for care experienced children and young people.

You can help us by adopting our policy priorities as yours.

Chief Executive Officer  
Deborah Jones



# Voices From Care Cymru: Manifesto for the Senedd Elections 2026

We believe the government should have high expectations for care experienced children and young people and the services they receive. The next Welsh Government should prioritise children's and young people's essential wellbeing and their social development, and the government should take responsibility for making sure young people in its care receive the quality of services they deserve.

These manifesto policies have been developed by care experienced children and young people from across Wales, supported by Voices From Care Cymru. These policies have been agreed by Voices From Care Cymru's Young Person's Advisory Group and we call on all political parties to commit to delivering them if their party is elected to form the next Welsh Government.

## 1. End the use of restraint on children and young people

### Stop Routine Restraint

Statutory guidance should be published to prohibit the use of all restraint other than in tightly defined circumstances and with judicial oversight.

### Aftercare and Reporting

Young people should always have access to aftercare, including medical support and independent advocacy support, if restraint is used.

All instances of restraint should be reported and subject to scrutiny.

### Wellbeing First

Guidance should promote trauma-informed de-escalation and harm reduction. The police should never be called unless it is to deal with serious crime.

## 2. Be accountable for children and young people's health and wellbeing

### Duty to Promote

Health Boards should have a statutory duty to safeguard and promote the health of care experienced young people in the planning and delivery of services so they are properly prioritised.

### Named Professionals

Designated senior professionals in all Health Boards should have special responsibilities for care experienced young people.

### Really Independent Reviews

There should be full independence for Independent Reviewing Officers, creating a National Review Service with care experienced young people on its board.

### Regional Placements

More specialist placements and carers with specialist skills should be made available in all parts of Wales.

## 3. Set higher standards for independent living

### Clear Entitlements

There should be higher National Standards for leaving care support, including named tenancy officers and proactive support to gain employment.

### No Homelessness

Local Authorities should be prohibited from allowing care experienced young people to be made homeless as a result of leaving care.

### Essentials Guarantee

Young people leaving care should never be allowed to be in a position where their income is not enough for them to afford to cover the cost of essentials.

### Championing Relationships

Young people's important social activities and connections should be acknowledged, protected and nurtured.

# 1. End the use of restraint on children and young people

*The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child says the government will take all measures to protect children from physical violence, injury, abuse or maltreatment (Article 19). The government commits to ensuring that no child is subjected to inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, and that any child deprived of liberty will be treated with humanity and respect (Article 37).*

## Our View

There should be a rights-based approach to eliminating the routine use of restraint through promoting young people's safety and wellbeing. The rules about when and how restraint can be used should be updated to strictly limit its use in practice – including physical, mechanical and chemical restraint as well as practices like keeping young people in seclusion or isolation.

Without approval through a legal process, after the event if necessary, restraint should not be used on young people. Restraint should only be used in circumstances where there is an immediate risk of significant harm. Young people should be entitled to receive aftercare and to seek an independent review of a decision to use restraint.

Young people should always have it explained to them why restraint is being used. There should be better recording, monitoring and reporting on the use of restraint so that the government and the public know what is happening across the whole of Wales. A justification to use restraint in one set of circumstances should not be assumed to apply in others where the purpose and effects are different. For example, the use of chemical restraint outside of narrowly defined medical circumstances risks becoming routine and undermining young people's privacy and their ability to socialise with peers.

Situations when restraint are used, or where there are concerns about a young person's behaviour, need to be seen in the context of ongoing and immediate pressures on young people in their lives. There should be more focus on using trauma-informed approaches to help to reduce those pressures to prevent and avoid using restraint.

Professionals supporting young people should avoid hypervigilance – where heightened risk-responses to behaviour typical of others their age can increase household tensions and undermine trust in supportive relationships.

The police should not be called to deal with minor rule-breaking involving care experienced young people that could just be dealt with within their household or with therapeutic support. Young people should not be criminalised or subject to invasions of their privacy when it is not necessary or justified. Where police are involved, young people should always receive support afterwards to make sure they are okay.

# End the use of restraint on children and young people

## What the next Welsh Government should do

### Stop Routine Restraint

- The government should publish new statutory guidance, co-designed with young people, on what is necessary, proportionate and in a child's best interests in relation to the use of restraint across settings including residential care, education and healthcare.
- No policy of restraint – physical, mechanical or chemical – should be included within the care plan of any young person without prior Deprivation of Liberty Order or other similar judicial authorisation establishing that no less restrictive alternative is possible. Without prior judicial authorisation, restraint should not be used on children and young people outside of the rare circumstances where it is necessary to prevent serious harm.

### Aftercare and Reporting

- Young people should have an entitlement to access to an independent advocate, a medical examination and an independent review of the decision to use restraint any time up to 30 days following any restraint occurring.
- The government should introduce transparency and enhanced national oversight in the use of restraint, requiring standardised documentation, introducing a requirement for national reporting and through facilitating the involvement of young people in scrutiny.

### Wellbeing First

- The government should require social services to prioritise de-escalation and harm reduction when responding to typical teenage behaviours and non-criminal welfare incidents. New alternative rapid response protocols for children's services should be developed with young people to eliminate the use police call outs to deal with matters which do not require police involvement.

## 2. Be accountable for children and young people's health and wellbeing

*The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child says the government will uphold children's right to enjoy the highest attainable standard of health (Article 24). The government commits to ensuring disabled children have support to achieve the fullest possible social integration and individual development (Article 23).*

### Our View

Care experienced young people should be supported more proactively to navigate the healthcare system. Things should never need to reach a crisis point before young people are able to receive a full assessment and treatment plan. Senior health leaders should make sure that care experienced young people are properly prioritised when they need healthcare and that they are supported to look after their wellbeing. There should be consistently high quality support for care experienced young people in every part of Wales.

Stronger cooperation is needed between health and other agencies, and with young people. Young people should never be allowed to miss out on routine and preventative healthcare. A missed appointment might be the result of a lack of minor practical wellbeing support but can have major consequences for a young person's health. Care experienced young people, including care experienced parents, should feel they can trust health professionals and know that there are professionals dedicated to making sure that they are receiving the support and care they need. Care experienced young people should feel confident they will be treated fairly.

Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) have an important role in ensuring that placements for young people are planned and supported properly to meet their short-term and long-term needs. They should have the capacity, support inputs and powers necessary to drive real improvement across multiple agencies.

There should be more suitable homes for disabled young people in every part of Wales so they do not have to move far away to get the support they need. Care experienced disabled young people should always have access to places they can go for the kind of social, sensory or therapeutic experiences that are fundamental to wellbeing.

All carers, including foster carers and all others such as those in children's homes, should be supported to develop a broader range of foundational and specialist skills so that there are more carers better equipped to support young people in trauma-informed ways through short-term or long-term health and wellbeing challenges they may face. Carers should receive comprehensive wellbeing support, including peer support, and carers should be supported through short-term pressures where it could help to avoid a young person needing to move.

# Be accountable for children and young people's health and wellbeing

## What the next Welsh Government should do

### Duty to Promote

- The government should strengthen the statutory duty for health boards to “safeguard and promote” the health of care experienced children and young people in the planning and delivery of services, not just “have regard.”
- This duty should require Health Boards to promote timely access to physical and mental health services, undertake proactive health assessments and follow up, and to promote continuity of care across placements and other transitions. New guidance in support of this duty should be co-designed with care experienced young people.

### Named Professionals

- The government should implement a stronger national approach to requiring the appointment of named designated professionals with responsibility for care experienced children within each Health Board, ensuring consistent capacity and remit, and with more explicit national requirements for specified assessments and joint working.
- These designated professionals should include a named senior midwife with specific responsibility for care experienced parents.
- ‘Virtual’ clinical teams of named individuals should be established to retain responsibility for young people who move health board areas, based on the ‘virtual head teacher’ model.

### Really Independent Reviews

- Implement genuine independence for Independent Reviewing Officers, with full separation from Local Authorities including separate funding and governance under a national service board including care-experienced board members with voting rights.
- The national IRO service should retain statutory duties to review care plans, assure placement suitability and have new powers to require written responses and emergency interventions.

### Regional Placements

- The government should develop enhanced regional specialist placement strategies to invest in specialist carers and placements with clinical support to reduce the number of instances of children being placed outside of Wales or a long distance from their home community or family for specialist support. Representative care experienced young people should be supported to contribute to strategy development.
- Local Authorities and other public bodies should have access to funding to establish and accredit new public sector specialist provision and training for specialist roles.

# 3. Set higher standards for independent living

*The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child says the government will uphold children's rights to the maximum extent of their available resources (Article 4) and will ensure to the maximum extent possible the development of the child (Article 6). The government commits to ensuring every child has a standard of living adequate for their physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development (Article 27).*

## Our View

Young people leaving care should have a clear and consistent range of support to develop independent living skills wherever in Wales they live. There should not be a 'cliff edge' effect – changes in support should be gradual, expected and well-organised.

Transition to independence should never just mean being signposted to welfare benefits – every young person should be encouraged to have ambition for themselves, to pursue their goals and to contribute to their community.

Young people should never be allowed to be made homeless as a result of leaving care. Care experienced young people should live in good housing with the things they need to live a decent life.

Young people should never be in a position where their income does not allow them to afford to cover their essential costs and live with dignity. Financial support should take into account young people's circumstances and the needs of disabled young people and those with long term health conditions. Young people should be actively supported to develop financial independence and should never be left to struggle financially or to become stuck in debt.

The survival and development of a young person includes their social development – social needs are survival needs. Developing positive social networks and confidence is good in itself and it also protects young people from negative influences and exploitation. Care experienced young people's social connections should be acknowledged and nurtured, developing social support networks as they grow up that will continue into adulthood.

Care experienced young people should not normally need to ask permission from social services to take part in social activities, and when they do have to ask for permission they should have a swift and reasonable response. When social services need to make sure activities are safe for young people to take part in, they should make sure that care experienced young people are treated just like any other young person would be treated.

No young person leaving care should be in a position where they do not have emergency contacts or where they are faced with having to move to a community where they do not know anyone.

# Set higher standards for independent living

## What the next Welsh Government should do

### Clear Entitlements

- The government should set higher national standards for independent living and leaving care support to ensure young people can access a clear and consistent range of support wherever they live in Wales and however the support is organised locally. Standards should be co-designed with young people.
- Support should include pro-active casework support with finding, applying for and maintaining training courses, paid work placements and employment opportunities.
- Standards should include timely and respectful communication with and regarding young people. There should be a ban on the use of wholly negative terms including 'criminal' and 'addict' being used to refer directly to any individual young person and in official records and communications.

### No Homelessness

- The government should strengthen the prohibition on Local Authorities allowing young people to be made homeless when they leave care. Conditionality should be imposed on central government funding to allow it to be withdrawn from Local Authorities who fail to arrange suitable accommodation unless and until such accommodation is provided
- Named tenancy liaison officers with responsibility for young people leaving care should be designated, with a remit to promote coordination of services and drive continuous improvement in the quality of support care experienced young people receive, to prevent unsuitable placements or gaps in support, including in emergencies.

### Essentials Guarantee

- The government should create a guarantee for care experienced children and care leavers, requiring that where a young person can show that their essential outgoings exceed the financial resources available to them over a period of four weeks or more, the government will meet the shortfall for a minimum defined period and until long term solutions can be put in place to enable that young person to have financial stability and as much autonomy as they can manage.
- Illustrative auditable schedules should be published in guidance to define the scope of essential costs, including: housing costs, utilities (including phone and internet), food and household supplies, transport costs (for accessing education and other essential services), personal care (including medicines, non-medical therapeutic products and essential health promotion such as physical activity), clothing and footwear, educational tuition/placement costs and study materials
- Leaving care support should prevent young people getting into serious levels of debt. Where young people do find themselves in debt there should be additional support including debt management and advocacy to enable them to regain and maintain financial stability.

### Championing Relationships

- The government should publish new statutory guidance, co-designed with young people, to require important social activities and connections to be protected and strengthened within care planning. A contact-building requirement should exist in instances where young people identify that social connections are lacking.
- The government should bring forward regulations, co-designed with young people, to restrict and reduce the requirements for young people to seek permission from social services to take part in activities typical of their peers. When permission is required, young people should have a substantive response within 48 hours. Where risk assessment is required, any steps taken by social services should be guided by the measures a reasonable parent would take, and the least restrictive option.
- A network of volunteer 'Connection Coaches' should be coordinated at Local Authority level, offering light-touch participation support to care experienced children and young people, including unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people and disabled children and young people, to take part in social activities in their community.
- An annual, publicised programme of mandated direct contact between senior service managers and any care experienced children or young people who wish to speak to them should be included in Corporate Parenting Statements and the attendance, issues raised and actions taken should be published.