



Newid Cadarnhaol mewn
Gofal Cymdeithasol
Positive Change
in Social Care



Llywodraeth Cymru
Swyddfa Genedlaethol Gofal a Chymorth
Welsh Government
National Office for Care and Support

Positive change in social care

National Office for Care and Support

Annual Report | 2025-26

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Chief Social Care Officer Foreword



As Chief Social Care Officer for Wales, I am proud to introduce the National Office for Care and Support's Annual Report 2025-2026. It reflects on a year of meaningful progress, driven by the commitment, energy and collective effort of

colleagues and partners across Wales. Together, we have built on the foundations laid in our first year to strengthen social care and drive improvement, with a clear focus on better outcomes for the people of Wales.

Over the past year, stronger communications, partnership forums and national events have created more opportunities to listen, learn and understand what matters to people and to deliver priorities. We have completed all the activity set out in Stage 1 of the Initial Implementation Plan, marking an important milestone for the National Office and for the wider ambition of establishing a National Care and Support Service for Wales.

Developed in response to the Expert Group's recommendations, the plan sets out Stage 1 of a three-stage programme spanning 10 years to create a National Care and Support Service for Wales, free at the point of need and delivered as a core public service.

As we continue into 2026-27, I remain focussed on raising the profile and voice of social care, strengthening practice through national standards and innovation, supporting the workforce and moving further towards a National Care and Support Service for Wales. Alongside this we will continue to strengthen safeguarding arrangements across Wales and ensuring that people's safety, rights and wellbeing remain at the heart of our approach.

We continue to hear clearly that people want a more seamless service, with health and social care working together around their needs. At the same time, we must be honest about the scale of the challenge ahead, including how we deliver this ambition in a way that is sustainable, affordable and able to respond to the demographic pressures already shaping demand for care and support.

There is still more to do, but this year has shown what can be achieved when ambition is matched by collaboration, shared responsibility and a clear focus on the people we serve.

I would like to thank everyone who has contributed to this work over the past year, and to recognise the dedication of the social care workforce and all those working across the sector every day to support people, families and communities across Wales. Your commitment, compassion and expertise continue to make a real difference. I hope this report is a strong reminder of how far we have come, and of the shared responsibility we carry as we continue to build a stronger, fairer and more sustainable social care system for Wales.

Albert Heaney CBE

Chief Social Care Officer for Wales

Brief overview of the National Office

The National Office is led by the Chief Social Care Officer for Wales and plays a central role in driving forward the Welsh Government's ambitions for sustainable, high-quality and person-centred social care services and the ambition to create a National Care and Support Service for Wales.

Bringing together engagement, improvement and delivery functions, it provides the leadership, coordination and practical support needed to improve outcomes, promote greater consistency in practice and keep the experience of children, adults and carers at the heart of care and support in Wales.

This broad remit is reflected in the structure of the National Office, which brings together several branches responsible for delivering priorities and projects across its work programme.

These are:

- **Analysis and Innovation.**
- **Commissioning and Market Oversight.**
- **National Care Service Programme.**
- **Pathways of Care and Hospital Discharge Guidance.**
- **Paying for Care and Future Funding.**
- **Public and Stakeholder Engagement.**
- **Safeguarding, Advocacy and Complaints.**
- **Social Care Workforce and Partnership.**

The following section sets out how this work has translated into delivery over the past year, highlighting key achievements across the National Office's core priorities.



Progress and key achievements in more detail

Leadership, Engagement and System Transformation

Over the past year, we have strengthened national leadership, engagement and system transformation across social care in Wales. Through policy development, governance, research and strategic communications, we have supported progress towards a fairer, more consistent and sustainable social care, while also raising the profile and voice of social care nationally.

A key focus this year has been continued delivery of the Stage 1 Initial Implementation Plan to move towards a National Care and Support Service, published in December 2023. Stage 1, covering 2022 to 2025, focused on putting the foundations in place for long-term transformation, and all activity committed to during this phase has now been completed. This marks important progress towards setting the right foundations for a future National Care and Support Service for Wales.

Strong governance has been central to this progress. The Strategic Advisory Group has continued to provide advice, challenge and assurance across the National Office work programme, wider social care transformation and delivery under the Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan.

Representatives from the following organisations make up the membership of the Strategic Advisory Group (2025-26):

All Wales Forum for Parents and Carers	Fair Work Forum	Social Care Wales (SCW)
Association of Directors of Social Services Cymru (ADSSC)	GMB Union	Trade Union Congress
British Association of Social Workers (BASW)	Improving Adult Care Together (IMPACT)	Unison
Care Forum Wales	Llais Cymru	Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA)
Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW)	National Health Service Executive Senior Leadership Team	Welsh Government officials
Centre for Adult Social Care Research (CARE)	National Provider Forum	Welsh NHS Confederation
Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre (CASCADE)	Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA)	Royal College of Nursing

By bringing together senior leaders and external voices, the group has helped test priorities, strengthen decision-making and support closer alignment between policy and delivery.

Equality, Diversity and the Welsh Language

This partnership working has been reflected in the delivery of the Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan through the Social Care Working Group, which brings together Welsh Government, delivery partners and stakeholders to oversee progress, share learning and support implementation. The plan is helping to improve fairness, transparency and consistency across social care, with a particular focus on tackling racism in policy, workforce practice and decision-making.

Progress has also been made in embedding anti-racist principles in commissioning supported by the digital commissioning toolkit linked to the National Framework for Commissioning Care and Support.

Funded and supported by the National Office for Care and Support, the BASW Cymru Consultant Social Worker (Race) role strengthened anti-racist practice across Wales during 2025–26, sustaining support for Black and Asian social workers, influencing education and workforce development, and contributing to policy change through the development of the Lives in Limbo adult social care paper.

The Chief Social Care Officer (CSCO) presented at the Mwy na Geiriau – More than Words conference in Llandrindod Wells in October 2025, the focus of the event was Caring in Welsh.

The CSCO highlighted a partnership project in collaboration with the social care sector which had made significant progress in enabling more people to receive care in their language of choice. This included strengthening Welsh-language skills across the workforce and delivering a pilot programme that achieved an 82% increase in staff Welsh-language capability.



Paying for Care

Practical improvements have also been made to Wales' paying for care framework. During the year, we reviewed and updated the Charging and Financial Assessment Regulations, which set the statutory framework local authorities must follow when developing and implementing local charging policies for care and support. These Regulations are supported by the nationally prescribed Code of Practice on Charging and Financial Assessment, which provides detailed guidance on the legal requirements for charging, financial assessment, direct payments, care home charging and deferred payment arrangements. Together, they help ensure that charging arrangements are fair, transparent, consistent and based on a person's ability to pay.

As part of these changes, the Minimum Income Amount for people in residential care increased from £44.65 to £46.35 per week from April 2026, helping to ensure that care home residents retain more of their income for personal spending. We also progressed work to assess how national principles for charging and financial assessment could be applied more consistently across Wales, with the aim of supporting fairer and more equitable outcomes for people who access care and support.

To support this work, we re-established the Paying for Care Forum, bringing together representatives from all 22 local authorities and the Welsh Local Government Association.

The forum provides a collaborative space to discuss and better understand how charging and financial assessment policies operate in practice, acknowledging areas of legitimate local variation whilst seeking to strengthen consistency in the application of nationally set policy.

This work has improved understanding of the factors that influence local approaches and has supported further development in two key areas:

- **Mapping legitimate variation in local authority charging policies to better understand how equitable outcomes can be achieved regardless of where a person lives.**
- **Reviewing the legislative and policy landscape, including the implications of wider reforms such as UK Government welfare changes.**

Through this work, we are strengthening the evidence base needed to support future improvements to the paying for care system and helping local authorities deliver charging arrangements that are fair, sustainable and person-centred.

Alongside this, we have continued to explore the financial and operational implications of delivering care that is free at the point of need, including the potential impact on individuals, local authorities and the wider health and social care system.

This has included work to better understand future demand, implementation considerations and the level of investment that may be required to support a sustainable long-term funding model. These insights will help inform future policy choices and will continue to be developed as part of wider work on social care reform and transformation, ensuring that future decisions are underpinned by robust evidence and a clear understanding of costs, benefits and delivery implications.



Engagement with the public and stakeholders

We also strengthened our approach to engagement by creating more consistent and visible routes for communication with the sector and the public. A regular National Office newsletter was established to share updates, highlight emerging work and promote good practice, supporting ongoing dialogue with stakeholders across Wales. Although in its infancy, the first edition successfully reached around 300 readers across social care. We also brought together leaders and practitioners through national leadership and good practice forums. Our presence at major national events, including the Royal Welsh Show and the National Eisteddfod, helped raise the profile of the National Office and created valuable opportunities for direct engagement with a wide range of audiences. This wider engagement activity also extended to Baroness Casey's Adult Social Care Commission, helping to ensure that Welsh experience and perspectives were reflected in wider discussions on social care reform.

Engagement with the Commission included visits to North Wales towards the end of March, providing the Commission team with direct insight into the delivery of social care in Wales. These visits offered an opportunity to showcase Welsh approaches to care and support, including community-based models, partnership working across health and social care, and day-to-day workforce practice. They also enabled the Commission to see first-hand how services are delivered locally and how national policy translates into practice on the ground. Feedback from the Commission team reflected the commitment and professionalism of the Welsh social care workforce, as well as the strength of local delivery models and collaborative approaches. Further engagement is planned to build on the learning from the North Wales visits and maintain ongoing dialogue with the Commission as its work progresses.

Four Social Care Good Practice Forums were held. Between 30 and 40 sector leaders and delivery managers from local authority social care teams across Wales attended each event.

The forums provided an opportunity to share learning and showcase good practice in key areas, including the Care Academy model, decompression and trauma support, digital innovation in service delivery, and implementation of the National Framework for the Commissioning of Care and Support. A significant outcome of this work has been the growing momentum behind the Care Academy approach, which has informed the commitment to develop a National Social Care Academy for Wales to support the future social care workforce across Wales.

Alongside this leadership, engagement and transformation work, the National Office has continued to focus on the practical changes needed to improve quality, strengthen the workforce and support consistent delivery across social care in Wales.

Social Care Good Practice Forum

The Social Care Good Practice Forum, run by the National Office, has provided an excellent opportunity to showcase innovative projects that are improving the delivery of social care across Wales.

The opportunity to have in-depth discussions around technological advancements was particularly valuable, alongside follow-up meetings with the Chief Social Care Officer and colleagues from across the sector.

Matthew Davies, Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council.

Working with the Third Sector

The Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA) was pleased to welcome the National Office for Care and Support to Gofod3, the national third sector conference, to host a workshop to discuss the National Framework for Commissioning Care and Support.

We also really valued the opportunity to facilitate a discussion with Albert Heaney about the future of Social Care in Wales with Third Sector Support Wales partners.

Joanna Davies, WCVA (member of the Strategic Advisory Group).

Quality, Workforce and Improvement

This year, we have continued to strengthen the quality, consistency and resilience of social care across Wales. Our work has focused on improving practice, supporting the workforce, strengthening safeguarding and advocacy, and building the evidence and operational insight needed to drive improvement across the sector.

National Framework for Commissioning Care and Support

During the year, we continued to support implementation of the National Framework for Commissioning Care and Support through a broad programme of practical support for commissioners across Wales.

Commissioning of services is the process of understanding what support people need, deciding what services should be available, choosing who provides them, and making sure they are good quality. This included regular national meetings with local commissioners, three mini commissioning conferences, growing online communities of practice and an implementation support tool with benchmarking and self-assessment functions.

Together, these have helped strengthen confidence, consistency and shared learning across the commissioning system. We also funded a further cohort of 10 commissioners to achieve a qualification in commissioning for wellbeing, bringing the total number supported to 48.

Alongside this, we have continued to gather evidence of care fees paid across Wales to explore how the value of care and support can be reflected more clearly in procurement and contract management, including outcomes and inherent social value.

This focus on commissioning is closely linked to the need for a confident and sustainable workforce. We have therefore continued to prioritise fair work, workforce stability and the longer-term development of social care careers across Wales.

Commissioning

The Level 5 Certificate in Principles of Commissioning for Wellbeing equips professionals to commission person-centred, outcomes-focused services across health and social care.

I just wanted to thank the National Commissioning branch in the National Office for their help. From our first meeting, through to the offer of a placement and support during my level 5 qualification, you have been super helpful, supportive and informative.

Richard, Local Authority Commissioner.

Commissioning

Section 16 of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act is about involving communities in how care and support services are planned and delivered.

The National Office's Commissioning Forum has helped us test our understanding of the principles and standards in the National Commissioning Framework, enabling us to give providers a meaningful opportunity to shape our self-assessment and improvement plans. Feedback from a National Office commissioning conference also highlighted our collaborative approach, transparency, and commitment to supporting providers through market development, monitoring, and fee-setting processes.

Lance Carver, Director of Social Services, Vale of Glamorgan Council.

Workforce

We worked closely with the UK Government to help shape Fair Pay Agreement provisions within the Employment Rights Act 2025 so that they reflected the needs of social care in Wales. A significant achievement was securing the inclusion of children's services through the Legislative Consent Motion passed in summer 2025.

Alongside this, our Social Care Fair Work Forum has brought together trade unions, employer representatives, local government and Welsh Government in social partnership to improve terms and conditions across the sector. One of its key achievements this year was finalising and publishing the voluntary Pay and Progression Framework. The framework provides an important foundation for more consistent pay, terms and career pathways, and will continue to be reviewed as further evidence on sector pay levels becomes available. Working closely with the Social Care Fair Work Forum, we also developed a public consultation on establishing a Social Care Negotiating Body. This would create a formal mechanism for agreeing Fair Pay Agreements and, for the first time, enable enforceable pay levels for social care workers in Wales.

This work has been complemented by wider action through the Social Care Workforce Partnership to strengthen employment practice across the sector, particularly in the independent sector. Over the past year, the partnership has focused on developing exemplar HR policies to support greater consistency. The first two policies, Recognition Agreements and Disciplinary and Grievance, were published in February 2026.

Changes to UK immigration policy created uncertainty for overseas care workers in Wales. In response, we established a role for the National Advisory Service (NAS) to support workers already in Wales who had been displaced or were seeking alternative employment. Since its introduction and up to the end of March 2026, the NAS has been contacted by nearly 400 workers and has provided direct advice and support to all those who have reached out to them including approximately 150 workers currently registered with them, establishing itself as a trusted first point of contact at a time of vulnerability and uncertainty. Feedback from partners has been positive, highlighting the importance of having a dedicated, accessible service to support workers navigating changes to their employment and immigration circumstances.

By connecting workers with care providers holding sponsorship licences and signposting wider support, this work is helping skilled workers remain in the sector while also supporting providers to fill vacancies.

We also worked closely with local authorities to understand innovative approaches to recruitment and retention, including local care academies.

These models have demonstrated strong retention rates, improved perceptions of social care and created clearer progression opportunities. Building on this learning, £1.5 million was announced in February 2026 to support the first phase of a National Social Care Academy for Wales. Working with Social Care Wales and local authorities, this will help extend the benefits of local innovation across Wales and support our ambition for a nationally recognised, locally delivered academy model.

Workforce

What makes the Social Care Fair Work Forum so effective is the commitment from social partners to work together in the interests of the social care workforce. The involvement of employers, trade unions, local government and Welsh Government ensures a wide range of perspectives are heard. While my role as Independent Chair is to provide impartial leadership, there is a strong sense that Welsh Government values the Forum's views, is committed to working in social partnership, and draws on the Forum's expertise in developing policies that will enhance terms and conditions for the care workers across Wales.

Rachel Ashworth, Social Care Fair Work Forum Chair.

Safeguarding

Alongside this work to strengthen the workforce, the National Office has continued to provide national leadership on safeguarding, advocacy and complaints, working closely with the National Independent Safeguarding Board, Regional Safeguarding Boards and the Wales Safeguarding Procedures Project Board. We have continued to lead delivery of the National Action Plan for the Prevention of the Abuse of Older People, which is now entering its third year.

We have launched the first UK ten year National Strategy for Preventing and Responding to Child Sexual Abuse in Wales 2026 to 2036 and its first delivery plan (2026 to 2029).

Together, these set out a long-term, whole-system approach to prevention, protection and support, built around four clear objectives:

- **Prevent child sexual abuse.**
- **Protect and respond effectively when there are concerns about child sexual abuse.**
- **Support children, non-abusive parents or carers, siblings and other family members when abuse has occurred.**
- **Support adult victim-survivors of child sexual abuse.**

Alongside this strategic work, we have also contributed to the England and Wales Inquiry into Group-Based Child Sexual Exploitation and implemented actions arising from other national inquiries, including the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse and other high-profile safeguarding reviews.

We have continued to oversee the national statutory advocacy offer for children and young people involved with children's services, and work has continued to improve awareness of advocacy rights.

Safeguarding

The Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse (CSA Centre) warmly supports the Welsh Government's ambitious commitment to a whole-system approach to preventing and responding to child sexual abuse. Ensuring meaningful engagement with partners and those with lived experience is key to the strategy's success.

The CSA Centre looks forward to continuing to work with the Welsh Government and key partners like Regional Safeguarding Boards in delivering on the Strategy.

Matt Rogers – Assistant Director – Communications, Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse.

Safeguarding

NSPCC Cymru welcomes the Welsh Government's 10 year strategy to prevent and respond to child sexual abuse. We are pleased to have worked with the National Office to help scope out existing gaps in policy and practice and are supportive of the strategy's public health approach, which places the responsibility for tackling child sexual abuse with everybody.

Cecile Gwilym – Policy and Public Affairs Manager, NSPCC Cymru.

Analysis and Innovation

Our work on analysis and innovation has continued to strengthen the evidence base for social care in Wales. Building on sustained partnership with local authorities, the quality of social care data has improved, enabling the publication of Social Services Capacity and Demand data from March 2026. This represents an important step forward in developing a clearer national picture of pressures and capacity, and our focus will now turn to making better use of this data to support delivery, improvement and shared insight across the sector.

This stronger evidence base is also supporting improvement in hospital discharge and patient flow, where our work has continued to focus on data quality, consistency and system improvement. Throughout the year, the team managed the monthly national dataset, providing a consistent picture of discharge delays and wider system pressures across Wales. By maintaining reporting systems, supporting consistent submissions from health boards and improving data quality and completeness, the team has strengthened confidence in the dataset as a trusted source of intelligence for operational and policy decisions.

During the year, work focused on strengthening the evidence base and supporting system-wide improvement, including publication of the Wales Adults Receiving Care and Support Census to inform more equitable policy development.

Pathways of Care

A £30 million Pathways of Care Transformation Grant proved to be a key lever for change beyond the hospital setting. The team oversaw the grant and supported local authorities to expand community and social care capacity to improve patient flow. Delivery and impact were monitored to ensure funding supported measurable improvements in discharge and outcomes.

The team has maintained oversight of the Hospital Discharge Guidance and undertaken work to develop discharge guidance for Mental Health and Learning Disability pathways to ensure guidance remains practical, current and fit for purpose. The guidance has also been strengthened to better support patients, families and carers, including clearer signposting and more accessible information on the discharge process, helping support safer, more consistent discharge arrangements and reduce unnecessary delays.

Building on the progress made this year, the National Office will now focus on sustaining momentum, strengthening delivery and taking forward the next phase of transformation in 2026-27.



Looking Ahead

The achievements, evidence, partnerships and learning generated through this work provide an important foundation for the continued development of care and support services in Wales.

