



SOCIAL RESEARCH NUMBER: 56/2019

PUBLICATION DATE: 17/12/2019

Research on the number of children in Wales placed into care from parents with learning disability and the reasons behind their removal

Executive Summary

The Institute of Public Care at Oxford Brookes University has undertaken this mixed method study for Welsh Government. The study includes a combination of:

- Rapid research and practice review.
- Quantitative research methods including an analysis of all-Wales data relating to children who have received a Care and Support Plan and/or who have become looked after from 2010 to 2018.
- Qualitative research methods including collection and analysis of data from a sample of children's case files, interviews with parents and interviews with professional stakeholders in five local authority areas across Wales.

It provides indicative evidence in relation to the following three key research questions:

1. To what extent are parents with a learning disability in Wales involved or over-represented within Children's Social Care Services?

There is insufficient reliable information about the number and proportion of children of parents with learning disability involved with Children's Social Care Services and/or coming into care upon which to base an opinion about the extent to which they are involved or over-represented in this population. One of the main reasons for this is the absence of a sufficiently clear national definition and guidance for Children's Social Care Services in how to identify and record such a disability (for the purposes of estimating a true proportion). However, accurate recording is further complicated by a range of other factors that may be present including parental reluctance to disclose a disability or differential causes of parental difficulties in processing or responding to information, for example a parent's own history of trauma, abuse, neglect or mental health problems.

2. What are the factors driving patterns of involvement of parents with learning disability with Children's Social Care Services?

Learning disability is rarely the only concern and reason for parents being referred to Children's Social Care Services and for children to be taken into care. It is difficult to disentangle a main factor in what are usually relatively complex cases, but other commonly presenting factors include: parental or family characteristics (that can also present risks) including parental substance misuse, domestic abuse, and/or parental mental health problems; poor home conditions; or parental vulnerability to abusive adults in the community. In many cases, the child of concern to services already has older siblings or half siblings in care.

However, it is clear that professional cultures and systems that encourage 'fast-tracking' of new parents into Children's Social Care Services or through court systems naturally place some parents at a disadvantage in terms of the time they will have to prove themselves as effective parents. Similarly, social work assessments that are not well-rounded and/or specialist assessments that are undertaken late or in inexperienced hands also have the potential to limit parental ability to benefit from services that are well-tailored to their needs at the very least.

Apart from well-tailored support services, supportive key (including social) workers and extended family members are clear resilience factors in addition to the parent's own internal resilience and motivation to parent.

3. What evidence is there of good practice along a journey of Children's Services intervention and broader support to parents with learning disability?

Although there are pockets of good practice, with some parents with learning disability supported effectively to care for their children, there is still much room for improvement; including in:

- identifying and effectively exploring the impact of learning disability on parents' capacity to parent in a timely way;
- providing parents with good quality and accessible information about what to expect from Children's Social Care Services;
- ongoing effective communication between social workers and parents;
- the provision of support to parents who are vulnerable in their own right (including in part but not only because of their degree of learning disability);
- the availability of advocacy;
- the availability of support sufficiently early, including to take into account the particular needs of parents with learning disability who are expecting a baby; and,
- ensuring that the support offered to parents with learning disability is sufficiently well-tailored to their needs.

The study findings suggest that more could be done to improve the national understanding of parental experience in this area as well as actual support services across Wales. Seven recommendations are made. These can be found in full in section 8 of the full report but are summarised, as follows:

1. Develop an improved national definition of learning disability to assist local authorities in identifying parents with a learning disability and recording these instances accurately for statistical purposes.

2. Require the national or local development and provision of easy read, accessible information about being a parent and / or being involved with Children's Social Care Services and the family court.
3. Develop national guidance and consider mandatory training for social workers on:
 - how to identify parent learning disability / difficulty in a timely and effective way;
 - how to communicate effectively with parents who have a learning disability or difficulty;
 - when advocacy should be provided; and
 - best practice in conducting assessments where a parent has a learning disability.Consider including other (early help) professionals in the guidance to facilitate earlier and more effective screening and support for parents with learning disability.
4. Encourage the development of effective protocols between Adults and Children's Social Care Services to help improve joint working and support between these services.
5. Encourage and incentivise the provision of early support to parents who may have a learning disability / difficulty and who are known to be vulnerable, for example because of adverse childhood experiences.
6. Promote more consistent provision of well-tailored support services to meet the needs of parents with learning disability / difficulty, whether support is provided in the parent's own home or in a parent and baby placement.
7. Promote more consistent provision of support for adults with learning disability / difficulty immediately after a child has been removed from their care with a view to helping them to address the issues that have had an impact on their ability to parent effectively and / or to care effectively for themselves.

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Full Research Report: Burch, K., Allen, V., Green C., Taylor, V and Wise, S. (2019). *Research on the number of children in Wales placed into care from parents with learning disability and the reasons behind their removal*. Cardiff: Welsh Government, GSR report number 56/2019.

Available at: <https://gov.wales/parents-learning-disability-involvement-social-services>

Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.

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