

Good Childhood Report 2017

Summary for Wales



**The
Children's
Society**

The Children's Society works with children and young people whose lives are complex. They often experience many disadvantages which – in combination – may prevent them from having a happy childhood.

Our Good Childhood Report 2017 shows the shocking scale of some of these disadvantages – from the 200,000 children aged 10 to 17 experiencing emotional neglect and the 1.7 million children in families experiencing problem debt, through to the 2.2 million children living in fear of crime in their local neighbourhood. One in three teenage girls is afraid of being followed by a stranger and one in four boys is worried they'll be assaulted. Fifty thousand 10 to 17 year olds faced seven or more disadvantages like these in Wales.

Our findings reveal the devastating impact that these multiple disadvantages can have on how children feel about their lives. Children and young people's happiness with their life as a whole is at its lowest since 2010. Worryingly, children facing seven or more of the 27 serious problems we asked about were 10 times more likely to be unhappy than those with none.

Across the country, local authority children's services play a crucial role in helping children and families to manage and overcome the serious problems in their lives.

However, there is an increasing gap emerging between the scale of the need and the funding available for local authorities to help children and families deal with these problems. The Welsh Government must urgently review the funding available for local authorities children's services in order to equip them to adequately address the scale of demand.

At the same time, Public Service Boards must ensure that they are making the well-being of children in their area a top priority for all local agencies. They should make children's well-being a principal focus of their local well-being plans, and involve children in the development of these plans.

It cannot be acceptable that so many children and young people in this country are experiencing serious problems that are leaving them unhappy. It is only possible to improve the well-being of children and young people across the country by correctly resourcing and prioritising the services which help children early, before they hit crisis point.

Children's well-being

Research with children in different contexts and countries around the world confirms that children want to be listened to and are keen to be asked for their views on topics that matter to them.

Since 2005, The Children's Society has worked in partnership with the University of York on a groundbreaking research programme exploring children's own perspectives of well-being, and developing robust measures to measure children's well-being over time. This is the most extensive national programme of research on children's subjective well-being in the world.

The latest trends over time show that although the majority of children are happy with their lives as a whole, they are less happy than they were in 2010. A significant minority – between 5 and 10% depending on the measure – have low overall well-being.¹

Figure 1: Children's satisfaction with life as a whole



Household Survey Wave 16, May/June 2017, 10 to 17 year olds, Great Britain.
Equally weighted by age and gender.

Children's experiences of multiple disadvantage

It is well established that children who experience adverse experiences or disadvantages in their lives are likely to have worse outcomes than other children in later childhood or adulthood. There is also evidence that when multiple experiences of disadvantage accumulate, they will experience worse subsequent outcomes. What is less clear is whether, and how, multiple experiences of disadvantage impact on children's well-being in the here and now.

From our experience running local services that work directly with children and young people experiencing some of the most complex problems, we know that they rarely face single problems in isolation. They are often dealing with multiple disadvantages in many different parts of their lives.

This is something that we have also observed in our research. In our Understanding Childhoods² qualitative, longitudinal study of 60 children growing up in poverty in England, we found important differences within our sample. Although all of the children were experiencing financial hardship to a greater or lesser extent, some were also facing a whole range of other challenges in different parts of their lives.

We used the latest wave of our household survey of 3,000 children aged 10 to 17 and their parents,³ to ask about a list of 27 types of disadvantage that the family might have faced in the last five years. Some of these disadvantages were asked of children, but the majority were asked of parents.

This list was chosen because it fulfilled a number of criteria:

- There is research evidence demonstrating that these items can be 'disadvantages' for children per se.
- We felt that it was ethically acceptable to ask either parents or children whether they had experienced these factors in their lives.
- It included a spread of items covering experiences that are comparatively rare and those that affect a sizeable proportion of the population.
- There was a balance of items affecting children directly and indirectly through the material or family environment in which they live.

Mia's story

Mia is 11 years old and in her first year at secondary school. She lives with her mum and two younger brothers in a flat where she has lived for the past year. She spends alternate weekends with her dad who lives in a neighbouring town. Mia's dad is no longer able to work due to health problems, and her mum is currently a full time mum. Poverty structures many aspects of Mia's everyday life – where she can go, what she can do and whether she gets to go on holiday.

Drugs, alcohol and mental health problems have featured powerfully in the lives of some of Mia's closest relatives and family friends. She has witnessed the devastating effects of interpersonal violence and the ways in which it can tear lives apart.

Many of the adversities that we tend to think of in relation to multiple disadvantage – poverty, violence, substance misuse, mental health problems and homelessness – are present in Mia's life. But in Mia's case it is the experience of these, in addition to other less obvious hardships, that are also important.

She has moved seven times in the last nine years. This has affected the way she approaches neighbourhood friendships – never getting too close to other children in a new area – and it has prevented her from putting down roots in a place she can call home. One of the things that really bothers Mia is the way her neighbours shout and scream all the time, race their noisy motorbikes up and down the road and bang their front door open and shut 24 hours a day, creating an environment of stress and heightened insecurity.

If Mia could help her family in any way she would give them more money. Not a lot more, but just a 'normal' amount – enough for her mum to stop worrying all the time and maybe even treat herself every now and then without feeling guilty. And if Mia could change anything in her own life she would create a future for herself free from sadness and anger, where she would be happy and remain so for the rest of her life.

The prevalence of different types of disadvantage

In keeping with our expectations, we found some types of disadvantage to be more widespread than others. Using Office for National Statistics (ONS) mid-year population estimates for 2016, we estimate that approximately 2.2 million 10 to 17 year olds across the UK are worried about crime in their local area and 2.1 million are living in households that are struggling with their bills. The full list of disadvantages explored is included in Table 1.

Table 1: Population estimates for various types of disadvantage

Type of disadvantage	% of children	Estimated population of 10 to 17 year olds experiencing disadvantage in the UK ⁴
Parent-child relationships		
Emotional neglect: Child has experienced emotional neglect	4.1%	200,000
Supervisory neglect: Child has experienced supervisory neglect	4.5%	250,000
Young carer: Child is a young carer	9.3%	500,000
Family/household factors		
Domestic violence: (Responding) parent has experienced domestic violence	13.3%	750,000
Alcohol: (Responding) parent has had problematic alcohol use	12.4%	700,000
Parental mental health: (Responding) parent has had a mental health problem	28.4%	1,650,000
Prison: Someone in the household has been in prison	3.9%	200,000
Parental illness/disability: (Any) parent/ carer has had a long-standing illness or disability	22.2%	1,250,000
Child illness/disability: (Any) child has had a long-standing illness or disability	13.1%	750,000
Bereavement: Someone in the household has died	7.4%	400,000
Residential transience: Family has moved house multiple times	20.5%	1,150,000
Forced move: Family has experienced a forced house move	13.7%	750,000
Maternal education: Mother left school without qualifications	5.2%	300,000
Paternal education: Father left school without qualifications	6.3%	350,000

Table 1 (continued)

Type of disadvantage	% of children	Estimated population of 10 to 17 year olds experiencing disadvantage in the UK ⁴
Material factors		
Debt: Household has problem debt	29.9%	1,700,000
Struggling: Household has struggled to pay bills	36.1%	2,100,000
Child poverty: Equivalised income is less than 60% of median household income	15.1%	850,000
Unemployment: Main income earner is unemployed	2.1%	100,000
Free school meals: Child receives free school meals	13.3%	750,000
Destitution: Family has used a food bank	8.5%	450,000
Homelessness: Family has been homeless	6.9%	400,000
Risk of homelessness: Family has been at risk of homelessness	8.9%	500,000
Overcrowding: Child shares room	10.4%	600,000
Overcrowding: Child shares a bed or doesn't have a bed	2.1%	100,000
Neighbourhood factors		
Safety of neighbourhood: Experienced two or more neighbourhood problems	32.5%	1,850,000
Safety of neighbourhood: Worried about two or more crimes/anti social behaviour happening	37.8%	2,200,000
Safety of neighbourhood: Experienced crime/anti social behaviour	17.0%	950,000

Number of disadvantages

We counted up the number of disadvantages present in children's lives to explore children's multiple experiences of disadvantage. Using the ONS mid-year population estimates for 2016, we estimated the number of children that are affected by multiple disadvantage in Wales. As our estimates are based on survey data for Great Britain as a whole, they cannot account for actual differences in prevalence of individual disadvantages in Wales, Scotland and England. Nonetheless, they may be a useful indication of the scale of multiple disadvantage facing children.

This demonstrates that 40,000 children aged 10 to 17 are not facing any disadvantage, but that this is a minority of children.

A more common experience – affecting half of the population – is for three or more of the disadvantages that we asked about to be present in children's lives. At the top end, we estimate that 50,000 children are facing seven or more disadvantages.

Table 2: Proportions and numbers of children aged 10 to 17 experiencing multiple disadvantage

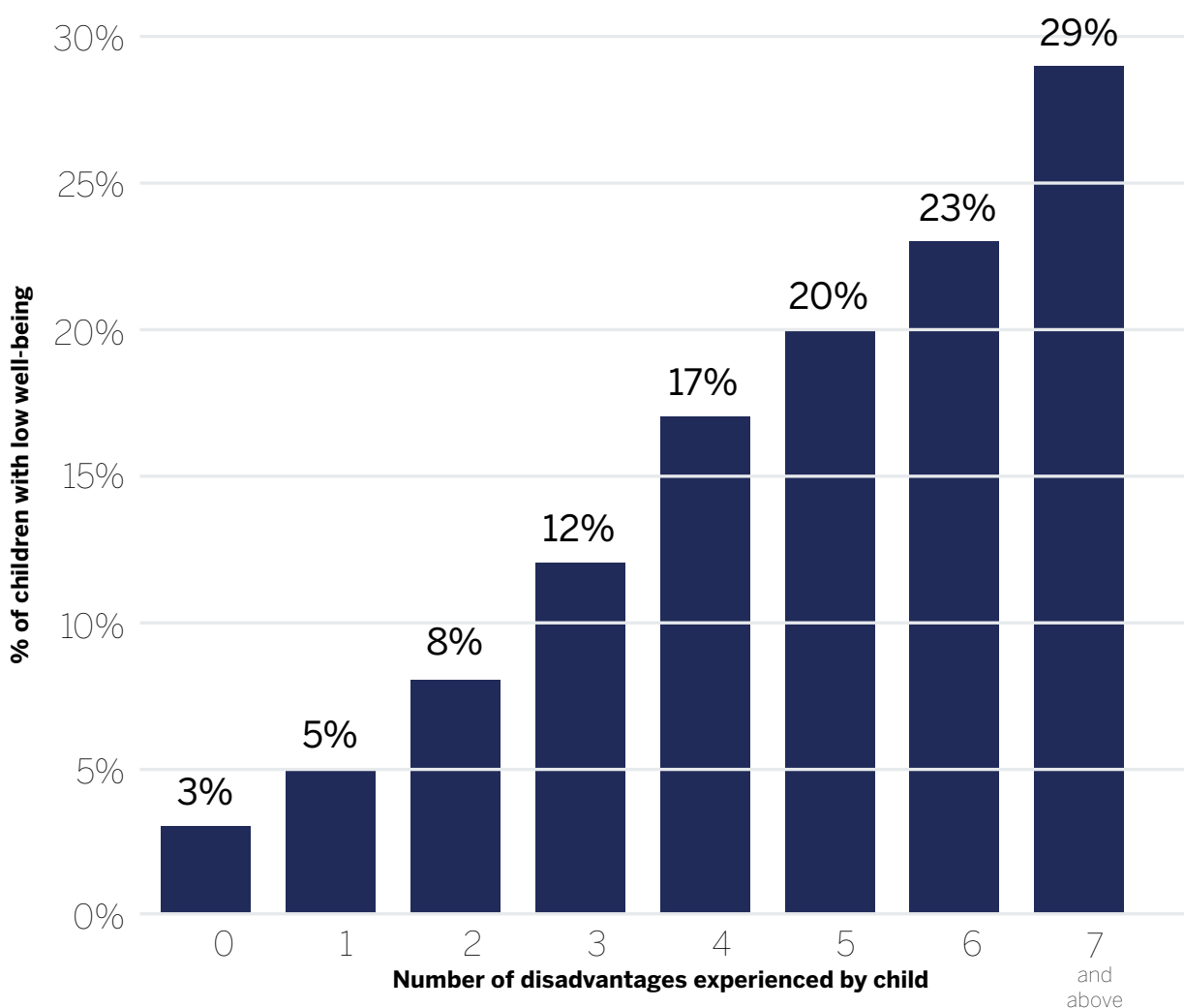
Number of disadvantages experienced	% of children	Estimated number of 10 to 17 year olds experiencing disadvantage in Wales ⁴
0	15.6	40,000
1	15.9	45,000
2	15.9	45,000
3	11.8	30,000
4	9.7	25,000
5	7.8	20,000
6	5.5	15,000
7 or more	17.8	50,000
Total child population aged 10 to 17	100.0	270,000

The impact of multiple disadvantage on children's well-being

We explored the relationship between the number of disadvantages present in a child's life and their subjective well-being. As can be seen in Figure 2, multiple disadvantage has an almost linear relationship with children's subjective well-being: the greater the number of disadvantages that children face, the more likely they are to experience low well-being.

While 3% of children with no disadvantages had low levels of well-being, this rose to 29% for children with seven or more disadvantages in their life.

Figure 2: Multiple disadvantage and children's life satisfaction



The impact of individual disadvantages on children's well-being

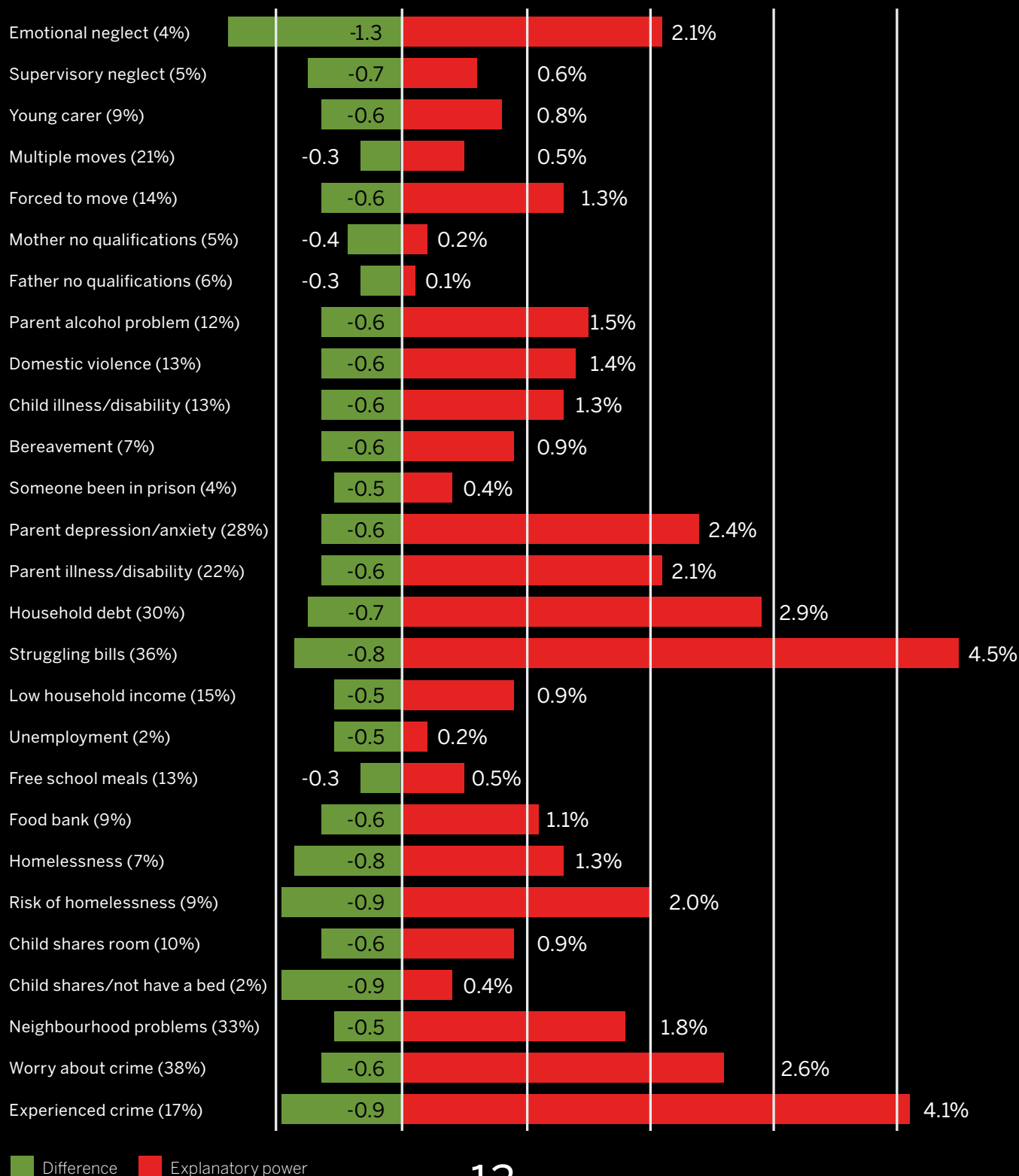
We looked at the effect of each disadvantage individually on children's subjective well-being. Almost all of the disadvantages were significantly associated with children's well-being (after taking account of age and gender variations). The main exception was a father having no educational qualifications, which was only marginally associated with lower well-being.

Figure 3 illustrates two ways of looking at the association between each disadvantage and children's well-being. The first is to look at the explanatory power of each disadvantage in affecting children's well-being at a population level. The red bars on the right of the chart show the power of each disadvantage⁵ (after taking into account age and gender). The figures can be thought of as a percentage – so living in a family that was struggling with bills had the largest explanatory power at 4.5%.

However this approach tends not to work as well for disadvantages that are quite rare. In these cases, the disadvantage could have a big effect on the small number of children who experience it but nevertheless not make a big contribution to explaining variations in children's well-being in the population as a whole.

Figure 3 also shows in the green bars the difference between a child having and not having the disadvantage.⁶ So for example although the explanatory power of the emotional neglect variable is only 2.1%, this disadvantage shows the largest gap (1.3 points on a scale from 0 to 10) in life satisfaction between children who experience it and children who do not.

The percentages of children experiencing each disadvantage are shown along with the description of the disadvantage in the chart for reference purposes.

Figure 3: Individual disadvantages and children's life satisfaction



Conclusions

This summary focuses on new data from the Good Childhood Report 2017 on experiences of a range of 27 disadvantages relating to parent-child relationships, family/household circumstances, material/economic factors and neighbourhood experiences among children aged 10 to 17 years old.

The large majority of children (85%) experienced at least one of the disadvantages, and more than half (52%) experienced three or more. If these proportions – which are based on survey data for Great Britain – are similar in Wales, we estimate that 50,000 children in Wales (19%) may be experiencing seven or more disadvantages.

Some of the individual disadvantages were relatively common while others were rarer. Fear of crime was the most common problem of all, affecting 2.2 million children in the UK, with 1 in 3 teenage girls afraid of being followed by a stranger and 1 in 4 boys worried they'll be assaulted. In the UK 1.7 million young people are living in households where parents are struggling to pay the bills, and we estimate that 200,000 children aged 10 to 17 are experiencing emotional neglect.

Experiencing almost any of these disadvantages is linked with lower subjective well-being for children. The estimated gap in mean life satisfaction (on a scale from 0 to 10) ranges from around 0.3 for disadvantages such as experiencing multiple house moves to 0.9 for the 2% of children who do not have their own bed, and 1.3 for the 4% of children who are experiencing emotional neglect.

The disadvantages also have a cumulative effect. Of children who had experienced seven or more disadvantages, 29% had low well-being compared to 3% of children who had experienced no disadvantages.



Recommendations

The evidence in this report points to the importance of early support for children and their families in preventing negative consequences on their well-being. We acknowledge recent developments in Wales to tackle adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), such as the establishment of the ACEs Hub. This report deepens our understanding individual disadvantages that combine to affect children's lives. Implementing the following recommendations for both national and local decision-makers would help address the issues set out in the Good Childhood Report 2017:

1. The Welsh Government should make more funding available to support children and young people who are experiencing multiple disadvantage, with a particular emphasis on early help services.

Our findings suggest a significant proportion of children and young people in Wales are facing multiple disadvantage in their lives, with 50,000 children aged 10 to 17 alone experiencing seven or more types of disadvantage affecting their well-being. The experiences of disadvantage range from financial hardship and emotional neglect, to being exposed to parental alcohol misuse and domestic violence at home. Evidence from the report shows that the more disadvantages in a child's life, the greater the chance of them facing lower levels of subjective well-being.

Support from children's services helps prevent the development and escalation of multiple disadvantage. The Welsh Government's 2017/18 Local Government Revenue Settlement allocated funding of £426.8 million for children's services. This is a £2 million cash increase (0.5% increase) from 2016/17.⁷ But as this is significantly below the current rate of inflation, this is, in reality, a reduction in funding of 2.5%

for children's services. This means that many of these services have to operate with significant constraints on their funding. The most recent figures available show that since 2010, the number of children in need in Wales has remained almost the same.⁸

Reductions in funding for early help services are contributing to the pressures on children's services. Local authorities are making the difficult decision to reduce spending on preventative and early help services. This leaves young people without the vital support that often helps manage and overcome problems before they reach crisis point. Yet interventions such as children's centres, teenage pregnancy support and short breaks for disabled children are good value for money, resulting in savings in the long run.

Our recommendations:

- The Welsh Government should address the expected financial shortfall in children's services in Wales in the next Budget.
- The Welsh Government should use local variations in the well-being of children experiencing multiple disadvantage to determine how this additional funding will be allocated. Particular emphasis should be placed on the provision of early services to help prevent needs from escalating.

2. Local Public Service Boards (PSBs) in Wales should prioritise the well-being of children experiencing multiple disadvantage.

Local agencies working with children, young people and their families have a crucial role to play in enabling a supportive and protective environment so that young people can flourish and thrive. The Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 established PSBs in each local authority area to improve well-being locally and strengthen joint working across services.

PSBs should address the low well-being of children experiencing multiple disadvantage within their local well-being plan by making it a top priority for all local agencies. These plans should assess the prevalence of disadvantages among children locally. This information should inform an annual children and young people's local profile that brings together the range of data that is available on children's lives in the area.

Based on some of the disadvantages identified in the Good Childhood Report 2017, local well-being plans should set out provision for children facing multiple disadvantage, focusing on difficulties in family relationships, household circumstances, material and economic factors and neighbourhood experiences, including the fear of crime. Plans should outline ways to deliver integrated responses, including signposting, for children and young people experiencing multiple disadvantage to make sure their needs are addressed holistically. For example, by making sure there is advocacy support available for children and young people experiencing emotional neglect, or by developing clear pathways to support across all agencies who work with young people experiencing multiple disadvantage.

Our children's well-being programme has consistently shown that listening to children and giving them a say in decision-making is the best way to make sure that policy and practice solutions deliver positive outcomes for children and young people. Local well-being plans should be produced in collaboration with children and young people living in the local area.

Our recommendations:

- Public Service Boards in Wales should use local well-being plans to address the multiple disadvantages children face.
- These plans should outline how agencies will promote positive well-being for children in the community.
- These plans should be developed in partnership with children and young people in the area.

Notes

¹ For more information on this programme, see The Good Childhood Report 2017

² The Children's Society, 2017

³ Since 2010 The Children's Society has conducted a regular household survey in England, Scotland and Wales that is socio-economically representative of these countries. The latest wave of the survey – conducted in May/June 2017 – included a sample of 3,000 10-17 year olds and their parents.

⁴ NB These are intended to give an indication of the scale of the issue for 10-17-year-olds, not to generate precise figures. For this reason, we have rounded down all of the estimates.

⁵ Controlling for age and gender

⁶ Again after controlling for age and gender

⁷ Welsh Government. 2017. 'Welsh Local Government Revenue Settlement': <http://gov.wales/docs/dsjlg/publications/localgov/170328-green-book-en-v1.pdf> [Last accessed 3 August 2017].

⁸ Welsh Government. StatsWales: <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Health-and-Social-Care/Social-Services/Childrens-Services/Children-in-Need/childreninneed-by-localauthority-categoryofneed> [Last accessed 4 August 2017]

Too many children and young people in this country don't feel safe, loved or able to cope. Together we can change their lives.

The Children's Society is a national charity that runs local services and campaigns to change the law to help this country's most vulnerable young people.

Our supporters around the country fund our services and join our campaigns to show children they are on their side.

Find out more at
childrenssociety.org.uk

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