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CHILDREN'S  
BUREAU**

Part of the family

# Executive Summary: Newport-Barnardo's Strategic Partnership Evaluation

*June 2024*

## Executive Summary

In 2011 Newport City Council and Barnardo's Cymru formed a strategic partnership to provide a range of family support services to children, young people and their families. This evaluation focuses on the work of the partnership between 2018 and 2024. It considers the extent to which the partnership has achieved its aims, the outcomes for children and families, and key factors in the partnership model.

### Outcomes and aims of the partnership

The partnership sought to achieve five broad aims<sup>1</sup> which together are intended to safely reduce the number of children entering care in Newport, through high-quality family support services for children and families on the edge of care.

This evaluation found that the Newport and Barnardo's strategic partnership is a well-established example of successful and collaborative joint-working. Having built upon early progress, the partnership has successfully navigated a more difficult period in 2017-8. The strategic focus of the partnership and the combined assets of the two organisations were seen to enable more effective interventions than either partner could provide alone:

*'Could you deliver those interventions if you were just a local authority? I'm not sure you could because I think you would risk losing [the intensive interventions] in the melee of everything else that goes on within a local authority. [...] I think the model would be less effective without the partnership.'* [strategic leader]

Evidence of progress against each partnership aim and key features of the partnership design and delivery that has led to the successful outcomes to date are set out below.

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<sup>1</sup> Stated in Section 6, Service Specification: Newport Partnership Contract 2018 and Section 7, Service Delivery: Newport Partnership Contract 2018.

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## Aim 1: Safely reduce the number of children in care, in proceedings or on the child protection register

Over the lifetime of the partnership there is evidence that its services are contributing to reducing numbers of children in care or on the child protection register, where safe and appropriate. During the partnership, numbers of children looked after are now consistently below the average for Wales after previously being higher. Whilst it is not possible to attribute Newport's lower rates of children looked after<sup>2</sup> entirely to the strategic partnership, it is clear that there has been significant progress in this aim. Partnership data and reflections from staff, parents and young people each found services were making a positive impact for families. Services are working with families who have a high degree of complexity and need, often with an immediate risk of a child or young person being taken into local authority care.

## Aim 2: Bridging the gap between universal and specialist service provision to prevent the need for the more intensive interventions

The services developed by the partnership have reduced the need to commission specialist provision in mental health, and have provided timely, effective support to families at immediate risk of a child entering care. Strategic leaders, managers, and practitioners were unanimously positive about the quality of partnership services provided to children and families, and gave numerous examples of positive outcomes. Equally parents, carers and young people were able to clearly explain the difference the support had made for them. This included practical changes at home as well as improved parent-child relationships, mental wellbeing, confidence, and reduction in safeguarding concerns. Support workers had helped parents engage with their social workers, and helped families to access other services by liaising with housing, health, and schools.

*'It made me feel safe that I was in good hands. I've worked with a hell of a lot of people, but she's changed my life massively in six months, which I didn't think would happen.'*

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<sup>2</sup> compared to the average of all Welsh local authorities

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Case studies of the Rapid Response and Therapeutic teams found the services were closely aligned with the partnership aims. The services provide practical and therapeutic support with substantive changes in the lives of children and families in Newport reported. There was strong evidence of stabilisation and appropriate de-escalation in case status for children, indicating that the services are helping to reduce escalation into more intensive and specialist provision.

The **Rapid Response Team** provides crisis support to children and families for six weeks, where there is an immediate risk that a child will enter care (or to facilitate family reunification where a child is returning home after a period of having been looked after). The evaluation found that the Rapid Response Team was enabling more children to remain safely with their families, or to return home safely. Where this was not possible, appropriate input was escalated swiftly to social workers.

Young people and their families were overwhelmingly positive about the quality support they received, the relationships they formed with workers and the changes that this enabled. Service data was equally positive as 32% of children's case statuses remained stable, 48% de-escalated, with 20% escalating between the start and end of the period of work with the Rapid Response Team. Given the service works relatively briefly, with children at immediate risk of becoming looked after, the volume of de-escalations is a notable success.

The analysis also suggested there were higher levels of escalation and lower levels of de-escalation for Global Majority children, compared to white children. This warrants further consideration and monitoring; however, the analysis was not conclusive due to limitations with the data. There was missing ethnicity data limiting the size of the sample which could be included, and ethnicity was recorded for the family as a whole (rather than for each parent and child). With the de-commissioning of the current Welsh Community Care Information System (WCCIS), there is an opportunity to improve equality and outcome evidence in a new system.

The **Therapeutic Team** was developed after managers identified a gap in therapeutic interventions for families. Staff were also keen to use their existing skills and qualifications in the wider Family Support Service.

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Previously therapeutic input had been externally commissioned, which was hard to access and expensive. The team works with children and families who have experienced significant trauma, with the children in or 'on the edge' of care. Support includes group and one-to-one support for parents and carers, and individual work for children. Where more intensive mental health care was appropriate the service had provided a 'bridge': helping to prepare people for therapy, and providing stabilising support during waiting times.

Across all levels of seniority, professionals were overwhelmingly positive about the impact of the therapeutic team for families and supporting work of other teams. After resolving some initial challenges relating to confidentiality and child protection within therapeutic work, the partnership nature of the service provided added value and improved quality, for example, by providing additional insights to support social workers. The wider partnership services, including the Therapeutic Team were described as helping to make the role of social workers 'do-able'. Shared learning and expertise influenced practice across wider teams.

*'I think [Therapeutic Team member] always communicates with the social workers. Say if the social worker is ever busy – because they can have their hands tied – [she]'s always at the phone and she always will answer. She'll email our social worker for me, and she'll help me with things like that. I know that's probably not part of her job, but she goes above and beyond to help. Oh, she's fab. [...] I felt like I was part of a team.'*

### Aim 3: Reducing specific risk factors for individual families, and increasing child and family resilience

Outcomes data shared by the case study teams, interview data and staff survey responses consistently indicate positive outcomes. Intervention by partnership services has contributed to reduced safeguarding risks and increased child and family resilience. Professionals reported that the strategic partnership had supported them to provide effective safeguarding, protection and developmental support for children, young people and their families 'on the edge of care'. Parents, carers and young people drew clear links between the support from the Rapid Responses Team and Therapeutic

Team to improvements they had been able to make at home, in school, in family relationships, and in their mental health. Examples included increased attendance at school, plans to return to work or training, building stronger social and support networks, and improvements in parent-child relationships.

The evaluation found that the partnership services, family support and social care were working well together. The impact of different teams was intertwined, with each part supporting the work of others. Social workers appreciated the ‘invaluable’ knowledge and skills of the Rapid Response Team and the interventions they provide. Rapid Response workers valued their colleagues’ social work expertise and were confident in their role safeguarding because of their nuanced understanding derived from partnership working. Where court reports and assessments were required in social work, input from the partnership services was valued and had enabled swift, timely and accurate decision-making.

#### Aim 4: Support children and young families to take part in decision-making within Family Support Services

Parents, carers and young people felt part of the decision-making process in their work with partnership services with examples of how this had influenced the goals, activities and timing of the support they received.

*‘[E]very time she came, she always asked us if we wanted help with this or this. “Do you want to be in touch with this team or this team?” Yes, we was always asked first’ [parent]*

Partnership professionals described adapting their approach and communication in collaboration with the family, and setting priorities of the work with input from children, parents/carers and social workers. In the survey of partnership staff, two thirds agreed or strongly agreed that children, young people and families are involved in the partnership and design of specialist services.

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Aim 5: Ensure a whole family approach is taken by working with parents, carers and family members as well as the child and/or young person

Partnership documentation set out clearly the whole family approach of its services which came across consistently in other aspects of the evaluation. Parents and carers felt part of a 'team', working together with the partnership professionals and social workers to support their children. Parents and carers expressed that they didn't feel 'alone', despite the significant challenges faced by themselves and their families.

## How has the partnership achieved these outcomes?

Key features of the partnership had helped to develop effective services and reduce the number of children entering care:

There was a **shared vision and goal** which was clear and consistent across the partnership and its services. This helped maintain a focus on the principal outcome of safely reducing the number of children becoming looked after in Newport.

**Sound governance arrangements, and effective leadership** were in place. Leaders understood the mutual needs of both partners. Staff have moved between Newport City Council and Barnardo's, helping to retain institutional knowledge and sustain the partnership's collaborative culture.

This stable partnership base has enabled **strong trusting and personal working relationships** to flourish and substantive **systems and process integration** to take place. Co-location of teams and shared information systems have enabled close, collaborative working and effective communication. There were highly collaborative working relationships with integrated, multi-disciplinary work across social care and family support services.

The partnership has successfully nurtured a culture where there is **permission to adapt and change**; new services are developed and tested in response to the emerging local needs of children and their families. This had led to flexible and responsive services.

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The partnership design uses **co-investment** with each contributing financially to the partnership, achieved despite challenging financial pressures for Newport and Barnardo's. As a third sector organisation Barnardo's is in a position to leverage additional funding, influence, and added value that a local authority could not access alone. The partnership was seen to provide cost savings by reducing numbers of children becoming looked after, and by providing therapeutic services within the partnership.

At the time of this evaluation there are two challenges facing the partnership. The main challenge for both partners was consistently seen as the **financial pressures** on Newport and Barnardo's. There is a strong risk that reduction or instability of finances could damage the partnership's ability to meet the complex needs of the families, and may threaten the future of the partnership.

The other key challenge facing the partnership is in staffing and retention. Where **commissioning cycles are shorter**, for example, the two-year extensions to the partnership, this caused uncertainty for both Newport and Barnardo's staff. **Ensuring the right personnel in key roles** was noted to present an ongoing risk. Previously this had impacted collaboration and led to a loss of focus but, at the time of the evaluation, this risk was well-managed through improved communication and stronger governance processes between the partners.

### Recommendations

Progress of the strategic partnership towards its five key aims has been very positive. The evidence strongly suggests that the work of the partnership has helped families to improve their lives and reduced escalations in social care status. The partnership has provided a strong foundation for professionals in social care and family services to work effectively together to support this goal. Therefore, our primary recommendation is the continuation of the factors that have sustained the partnership and been key to the design and delivery of services.

We recommend a small number of other actions:

- Ensure that new data collection systems enable robust analysis of child level outcomes, and can improve recording of ethnicity and other

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characteristics to support monitoring of equality in access and outcomes from the partnership services.

- Children and families are included in decision-making about their own support; however, there may be additional scope to include them in service design and development.
- Update the partnership Theory of Change and use it to guide decision-making and service development.
- Continue to share learning from the strategic partnership within, and beyond, Newport City Council and Barnardo's.