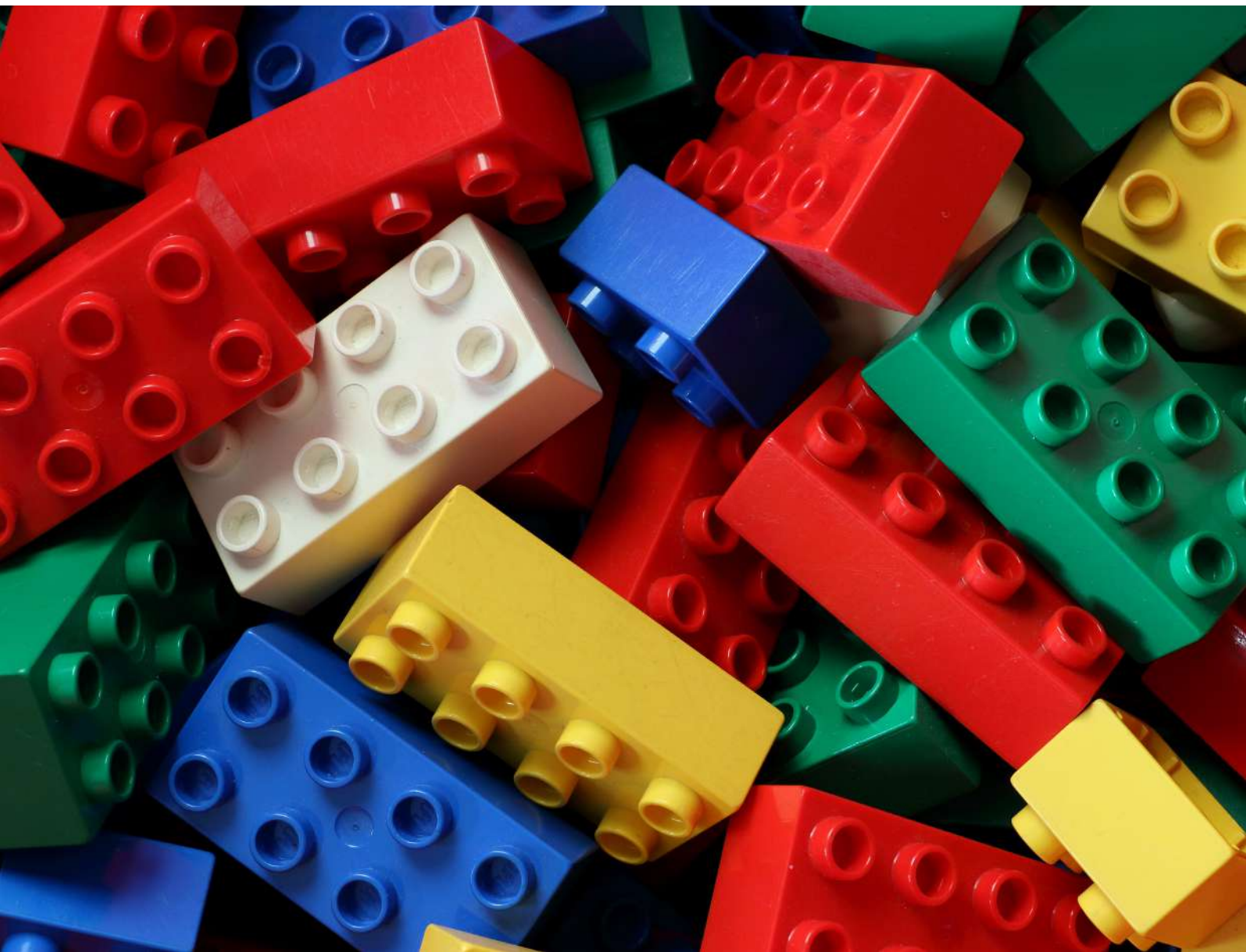




# CASCADE Partnership



Ymchwil Iechyd  
a Gofal Cymru  
Health and Care  
Research Wales



**2021 - 2022**  
**Annual report**





## CASCADE Infrastructure Partners



# Contents

<b>1. Director's overview</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2. Who's who in the CASCADE Partnership</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>3. Summary of the year</b>	<b>6</b>
Grants and projects	7
Sector engagement and making a difference	8
Involving children and parents in our work	8
Developing our international links	9
<b>4. Research</b>	<b>10</b>
Education of children and young people in care	11
Reducing the need for children to be in public care	13
Family involvement	15
Research excellence	17
<b>5. Public involvement, engagement and dissemination</b>	<b>18</b>
Public involvement	18
Sector engagement and dissemination	19
<b>6. Conclusion</b>	<b>20</b>



---

# 1. Director's overview

It is a pleasure to be able to write the foreward for our second annual report. The report explains who we are, summarises our performance and presents case studies that illustrate some key achievements from this year.

The CASCADE Partnership aims to undertake excellent research that makes a meaningful difference to children and families involved with children's social care. We do this by collaborating across Centres to apply methodological expertise to questions with policy and practice significance. We place the experiences of children and parents at the heart of our work. We also deliver the ExChange network to engage adult and child social care practitioners across Wales with research through events, our websites, social media and direct emails.

By any standards this year has been a successful one, with increased grant capture, enhanced sector engagement and more involvement of children, young people and parents in our work. I hope that this report provides an accessible overview of some of the work we have undertaken and the difference we hope that it is making.

On a personal note, this year our family became foster carers. As a result, I have seen research in children's social care from a different perspective, with our children and family receiving services. It has been incredibly affirming to see the research of the CASCADE Partnership being an integral part of many of the best things we have experienced. This has included progressive local and national policies, helpful services for children and parents and innovative ways of providing support. If I ever had doubts about the importance of the work we do they were removed forever by experiencing services directly. The work of the CASCADE Partnership makes a real difference to thousands of people every day. I hope you enjoy reading more about it in this report.

## Donald Forrester

Director, CASCADE Partnership  
Professor of Child and Family Social Work  
Cardiff University



*“As an academic trials unit, we embrace team-based approaches to solving the challenges of designing trials. The academic partnership led by CASCADE brings together methodologists with expertise in trials, routine data, and process evaluations with experts in the children’s social care setting. Resulting innovations not only enhance methods for evaluating social care interventions but also add value in other research settings with historically underserved populations.”*

## Mike Robling

Professor and Director of Population Health Trials at the Centre for Trials Research

## 2. Who's who in the CASCADE Partnership

The Partnership brings together four research centres. We are led by a Governance Board which meets quarterly – though much of our dynamism and the generation of new ideas comes from the work we do together developing and delivering specific projects or areas of work and regular awaydays and seminars.



**Donald Forrester** is Professor of Child and Family Social Work and Director of CASCADE. He is Director of the Partnership and has responsibility for overseeing all its work.



**Jonathan Scourfield** is Professor of Social Work and Deputy Director of CASCADE. He has a key role in developing our work applying data linkage to children's social care.



**Alyson Rees** is Professor in Social Work and Assistant Director of CASCADE. Alyson leads our all-Wales social care research engagement work – known as ExChange.



**David Wilkins** is Reader in Social Work and Assistant Director of CASCADE. David has lead responsibility for developing the external profile, influence, and impact of the Partnership.



**Jo Parry** is Centre Manager at CASCADE and leads on the efficient delivery of professional services support across the Partnership.



**Mike Robling** is Professor and Director of Population Health Trials at the Centre for Trials Research. He leads the contribution of the CTR and has a key role developing complex and innovative evaluative methods for CSC.



**David Ford** is Professor of Informatics and Director of Population Data Science based in Swansea University Medical School. He leads the contribution of SAIL Databank, supporting the development of a portfolio of studies using advanced data linkage methods applied to children's social care (CSC).



**Katherine Shelton** is Professor of Psychology and Director of the Centre for Human Development Science at Cardiff University. Katherine is currently developing a study investigating the shaping of mental health and the psychological mechanisms that characterise transitions for care-experienced young people.

# 3. Summary of the year

Reporting period: **2021/2022**



**Health and Care Research Wales infrastructure award to the group**



Direct funding awarded  
**£594k**

Jobs created through direct funding



## Grants won during reporting period

Grants won	Led by group	Group collaborating
Number	<b>23</b>	<b>2</b>
Value	<b>£2.7m</b>	<b>£3.1m</b>
Funding to Wales	<b>£2.6m</b>	<b>£428k</b>
Funding to group	<b>£2.6m</b>	<b>£428k</b>
Additional jobs created for Wales	<b>26</b>	<b>4</b>
Additional jobs created for group	<b>24</b>	<b>0</b>



Number of publications



Number of public engagement events



Number of public involvement opportunities

## Grants and projects

Grant capture is the life blood of any research centre. This year has been remarkably successful in this respect: we have 25 new awards, 8 more than last year. This has seen our success in grant applications rise from a healthy 32% to a remarkable 58% and our award value more than double. Our portfolio of studies across the Partnership of led and supported awards, to date, is now £8.2 million.

A strategic focus for this year was increased grant capture from key health funders, such as the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) and the Medical Research Council (MRC). We have had great success in obtaining funding from these sources. The NIHR are funding two important studies focussed on helping us understand family group conferences in children's social care. Professor Katherine Shelton is leading the Welsh arm of a major MRC research project looking at the mental health of children in care over time (see Box).

This success has not happened by accident. Our Health Care Research Wales infrastructure funding has enabled it in two ways. First, our Partnership brings together people with a deep understanding of the children's social care sector and those with methodological expertise. This allows us to ask the right questions, and develop studies that are likely to be able to answer them. Second, we provide extensive support for bid development and writing. This includes seminars and informal meetings, writing retreats, mentoring for staff, help in every element of bid development, our active groups of parents and care experienced young people and the involvement of more experienced staff in supporting projects led by newer researchers.

### Understanding the mental health of children in care

Professor Shelton is part of a major £2.8 million collaboration led by colleagues at Oxford and Bath and funded by UK Research and Innovation that will explore the wellbeing and mental health of children in care. The study will look at two key transition points – moving to secondary school and leaving care. The research will involve secondary analysis of existing data, collecting new data for around 600 children in care and their carers and involving young people and families in the research. It will generate evidence that is important for both our academic understanding of factors influencing the welfare of children and that will have implications for policy and practice.



---

## Sector engagement and making a difference

The Partnership is not just about doing good research – our aim is to make a difference. To achieve this, we work hard to engage the sector with our research.

As part of our infrastructure work we run ExChange – the all Wales social care research engagement network. Unlike CASCADE as a whole, ExChange covers both adult and child social care. The pandemic saw a shift to online delivery of our sector engagement work, and this has been extraordinarily successful. For instance:



Our bitesize fortnightly bulletin now reaches **1738** people



Our **29** webinars and events were watched live by **1991** people and had an additional **3641** watches on Youtube, meaning a total viewership of **5632**



Our new websites have been accessed over **100,000** times by people from **102** different countries



Our blogs have had **1472** readers and our podcasts **800** listeners

We have also seen increased media interest in our work, in Wales and across the UK. Our research has featured in The Times, The Guardian, The Western Mail, BBC Wales TV and radio and a variety of other radio stations.

## Involving children and parents in our work

We have always placed involving children and parents with direct experience of children's social care at the heart of what we do. This has, once again, been hugely successful – with 52 events involving 151 care experienced young people or parents. This year we have taken an important further step of employing people with direct experience of children's social care as co-researchers, or "peer researchers". We now have 10 peer researchers working across multiple projects. They provide a deep understanding of the nature of issues in children's social care that enriches the work we do. We are also very happy that some want to develop careers as researchers with CASCADE. Supporting those who have experienced the system to help us understand and improve it is a fundamental aim for the Partnership.

*"Cascade does the most exciting research in the field of child and family social work. I hope we will have a centre like this in Finland too one day"*

**Elina Aaltio,**

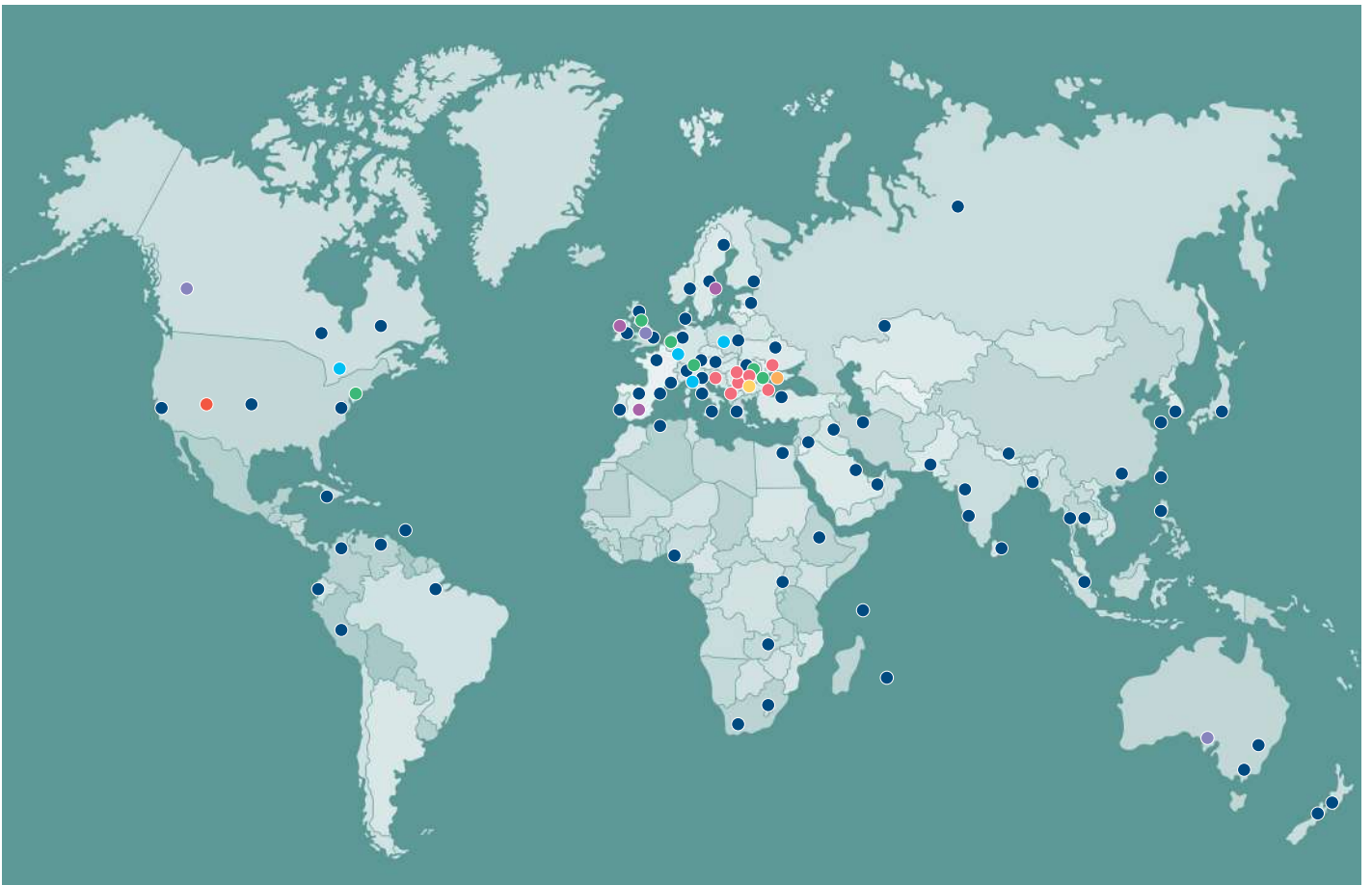
Doctoral Student, University of Jyväskylä,  
Finland



## Developing our international links

A feature of the year has been our development of international collaborations. We are partners with bids being led from Finland, Denmark and the USA, we have authored papers with colleagues from 13 different international institutions and we now provide annual teaching on research methods for PhD students in Italy and Poland.

Our dissemination work has also become more international: five per cent of those listening to our podcasts are based in the USA, we have subscribers to our fortnightly email newsletter from all over the world and our website has been visited by people from 102 countries in the world.



### KEY

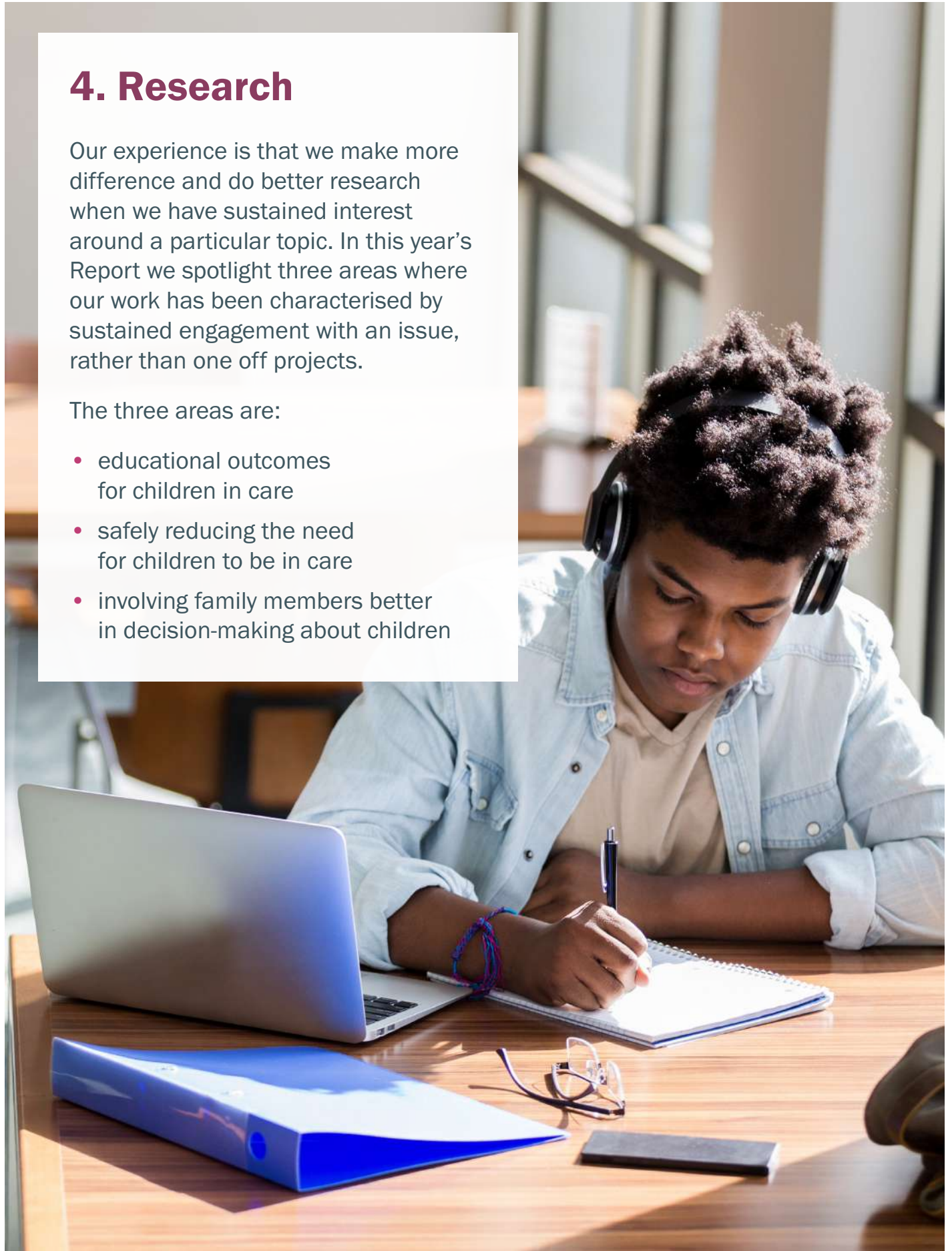
- |               |                    |                |
|---------------|--------------------|----------------|
| ● Network     | ● Collaboration    | ● Interview    |
| ● Publication | ● Award            | ● Presentation |
| ● Conference  | ● Research Project | ● Online Reach |

## 4. Research

Our experience is that we make more difference and do better research when we have sustained interest around a particular topic. In this year's Report we spotlight three areas where our work has been characterised by sustained engagement with an issue, rather than one off projects.

The three areas are:

- educational outcomes for children in care
- safely reducing the need for children to be in care
- involving family members better in decision-making about children



## Education of children and young people in care

Children in care do less well educationally than other children. The gap is around 20% at key stage 2, but increases at every subsequent stage. Around 6% of children in care go to university straight after school, with a further 6% going later in life. For children not in care the proportions are about 40% and 50% respectively. The CASCADE Partnership has been involved in studies aimed at addressing this gap since it was founded, and this continues to be an important area of our work.

Our research in this area started with the Looked After Children in Education (LACE) study which started in 2014. Subsequent work directly arising from LACE included further grants to enhance the impact of the research and the Fostering Wellbeing programme, which Professor Alyson Rees and others evaluated. Our current related work includes Dr Hannah Bayfield's fellowship on how we can help and support children in care to go to university and Dr Phil Smith's fellowship on care-experienced young people in pupil referral units. Other relevant studies include Dr Sarah Thompson's fellowship on children in care with autistic spectrum disorder and a collaborative proposal to understand variations in educational outcomes using data linkage led by Dr Lowthian (Swansea University).



### Understanding the higher education experiences of care-experienced young people in Wales

This three-year Post-Doctoral Fellowship, funded by Health and Care Research Wales and carried out by Dr Bayfield, aims to understand what Welsh Higher Education Institutions (HEI) are doing to improve access to, and success in, Higher Education for care leavers, and to assess the effectiveness of these activities in order to produce recommendations for best practice.

Twenty five interviews have been conducted with professionals and 22 care-experienced young people from across Wales took part in interviews and focus groups.

Professionals highlighted the importance of networks and information sharing, the difficulties of identifying care-experienced students for support beyond the age of 18, and difficulties around transition periods that link to broader issues of post-18 support and the 'care cliff'. Phase two of the project highlighted that consistency, expectations and support all played key roles in care-experienced young people's journeys through education, including the transition to Higher Education.

Findings led to a successful application for Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funding to increase impact by developing a website focused on signposting and providing information, advice and guidance on higher education for care-experienced people in Wales and those who support them.



## The Looked After Children's Education Study (LACE)

Led by Dr Dawn Mannay and a team of CASCADE researchers, LACE was one of the first studies to research education and care in Wales. It involved interviews with 65 children in care and co-producing creative resources to influence policy and practice. A particular feature of the study was the way it involved young people throughout the study and the creative materials that were jointly produced to publicise key findings from the research.

The study resulted in changes to policy and practice, including priority being given to children in care in admissions and funding for training for foster carers. It was submitted to the 2021 Research Excellence Framework and judged a 4\* example of impact, the maximum possible for both reach and significance. The resources for LACE continue to be housed on the ExChange website – and several of our subsequent studies have directly or indirectly built on the work of the LACE project.

## Reducing the need for children to be in public care

Children's social care mainly works with children in their families, however some children enter public care when their parents are considered unable to care for them at home. Being in care is the right option for some children, who need to be protected from serious harm. Yet removing children from families is perhaps the most serious intervention the state can make in family life, and should therefore only happen when it is definitely needed.

This makes the stark increases in care rates of recent decades potentially concerning. Between 2003 and 2021 the care rate in Wales increased by 89%. While there have been increases across the UK, they are most marked in Wales: in 2003 the rates for England and Wales were similar, now Wales has 60% more children in care per head of population than in England.

The CASCADE Partnership is actively involved in research, policy and practice developments aimed at understanding why care rates are so high and exploring what we might do about it. In our work with the What Works Centre for Children's Social Care (WWCSC) in England we reviewed the international literature on this topic, as well as more specific systematic reviews of evidence for Intensive Family Preservation Studies, the Signs of Safety model and Family Group Conferences. The last of these led to further work on this topic outlined in the next case study. We have also supported work in Wales. This year has seen the publication of our national survey of the children's social care workforce about why care rates are high and differences between local authorities (LAs) and the continuation of a programme of work led by Dr Louise Roberts on supporting parents who had been in care.

There are no easy answers to the complicated questions posed by the increases in care rates in Wales over recent decades – but the work of the CASCADE Partnership is focussed on providing the evidence that those delivering policy and practice need in order to make the best decisions for individual children and for policy and service development.



---

## National survey of why there are large variations between local authorities in care rates

While care rates overall have seen dramatic rises, these vary enormously between local authorities (LAs). For instance, since 2003 care rates in Monmouthshire have increased by over 350% but they have barely changed in Carmarthenshire.

It is difficult to research such variations. In an attempt to do so Professor Donald Forrester and Sophie Wood carried out a national survey of the views and experiences of people working in children's social care in Wales. The survey found significant differences in the responses of those in LAs with increasing care rates compared to those with reducing rates, with stronger positive values about birth families and less likelihood to recommend removal in response to case studies. Respondents in LAs with reducing care rates were also more confident about decision making and more positive about support for practice in their LA. These findings suggest that some of the variation in care rates between LAs is likely to be about differences in values and support for practice. This is important, because if some LAs are "bucking the trend" for increasing care rates there are likely to be lessons that can be learnt from them for the system as a whole.

The findings were quoted in the English Independent Review for Children's Social Care. They have also informed ongoing work in Wales, including within Welsh Government and with the Heads of Children's Services across Wales. We are now working actively with the Association of Heads of Children's Services and specific LAs to explore ways of safely reducing the need for children to be in care.

## Helping children from care as parents

Dr Louise Roberts is leading a key programme of work relating to the experiences and outcomes for young people in and leaving care who are parents. Initial work by Dr Roberts identified extraordinarily high proportions of care leaver parents having their own children removed. Her work has moved on to co-producing changes to policies and practices to address this.

In collaboration with Dr Dawn Mannay and Rachael Vaughan the group were successful in securing ESRC funding for an Impact project to challenge stigma, discrimination, and poor outcomes for young parents in and leaving care.

This project worked co-productively with care experienced parents and partner organisation Voices from Care Cymru, The National Youth Advocacy Service Cymru and Tros Gynnal Plant Cymru to produce a best practice Charter aimed at corporate parents.

As a result, the group have launched a "Care Experienced Parents Charter". The charter is designed to consider the needs of young people, before and after they become parents, and makes a commitment to challenging stigma and discrimination. One of the most significant commitments in the charter sees the local authority move from a policy of automatic pre-birth care assessment referrals to a more proportionate risk-based approach. Several local authorities have signed up to this and the aim is for all local authorities across Wales to do so.

As a result of wider interest in the charter, funding has been extended to allow for further promotion and dissemination, across the UK, Ireland and Italy.

## Family involvement

Meaningful involvement of parents and other adult family members in children's social care is a key principle of legislation in Wales and England, yet research suggests the sector is often not good enough at this. Child protection case conferences in particular have been found to be alienating and overwhelming for parents. In this context, The CASCADE Partnership is focusing on alternative approaches, studying good practice in family involvement including key studies evaluating Family Group Conferences and parental advocacy.

We are also trying to involve parents with lived experience across the work of the Partnership. Our parent network which advises us on our work has gone from strength to strength this year, with members growing in confidence.

We are also involving more people with lived experience of children's social care in our project. We now have parents or care experienced young people working across multiple projects as part of our research teams.



## Family group conferences research

Family group conferences (FGCs) bring family and friends together to make decisions about what is best for children. They are often used when there are serious concerns about children's safety. During our work in developing the WWCS we reviewed the evidence for FGCs. We then piloted the use of FGCs as an alternative to child protection conferences, which are mostly made up of professionals and can be alienating for parents. From that work we made two successful bids to the NIHR for large projects that will explore and develop our understanding of how FGCs can be used and evaluated:

Family VOICE, is a £1.2m four-year project led from the CASCADE Partnership by Professor Jonathan Scourfield and involving colleagues from DECIPHer and Oxford University. It involves co-designing an evaluation questionnaire which will be used in services across the UK to explore how FGC quality and context make a difference to how things work out for families. The study will also use social care and health data to look at outcomes two years after a FGC, comparing families who have had FGCs with similar families who did not have one. Two researchers with lived experience of FGCs are employed on the project, one of whom is a co-investigator.

The second study, is an £830,000 evaluation of FGCs led from Exeter, with current CASCADE Partnership researchers Lorna Stabler and Dr David Wilkins as co-investigators. It will study the use of FGCs as an alternative to traditional child protection case conferences in one London borough. The focus is what works to get social workers to choose the FGC pathway, and which families this new pathway should be chosen for.

---

## Improving Advocacy for Parents

The child protection process can be very intimidating. This is even more true for parents who may struggle to articulate their views. Parental advocacy seeks to address this by having someone support a parent through the child protection process, making sure they understand everything that is happening and helping them to voice their opinions.

Two studies led by Dr Clive Diaz are looking at how parental advocacy works in practice. One of the CASCADE studies is focused on South Wales and funded by the service providers the National Youth Advocacy Service. The other looks at a peer-led version of parent advocacy in the London Borough of Camden and is funded by What Works for Children's Social Care. Peer-led parent advocacy means that parents who have themselves had experience of the child protection system act as advocates for others.

Parental advocacy is an approach the Welsh Government has promised to roll out across Wales during the current Senedd term. The recent Independent Review of Children's Social Care in England has recommended a very substantial increase in the use of parental advocacy. So these studies seem both timely and likely to make a big difference.





## Research excellence

The work of the Partnership has been recognised in various ways this year. These are some of the highlights:

### Senior Leaders and Speciality Leads for Health Care Research Wales

We are delighted that both Professor Forrester and Professor Scourfield were recognised as Senior Leaders in social care and health by Health and Care Research Wales, and they look forward to supporting the development of research capacity and the use of research to improve practice across Wales over the next three years.

Professor Scourfield and Dr Maxwell have also become joint Speciality Leads for social care. This is a new role and a key opportunity to further develop capacity in both child and adult social care in Wales in the coming years. We look forward to seeing exciting developments in this space.



Ymchwil lechyd  
a Gofal **Cymru**  
Health and Care  
Research **Wales**

### The Impact of CASCADE's Work Recognised

The Research Excellence Framework is a UK wide exercise judging the quality and impact of research. CASCADE research was submitted to two different panels this year, Sociology and Education. Each submission was judged in the top ten in the country – and we are delighted to have been part of these successes.

The impact of the work we do achieved a particularly high profile, forming two separate case studies. This included one on looked after children's education led by Dr Mannay (see page 12) and a second one focussed on Dr Hallett's work to address child sexual exploitation.

### Promotions

One way universities recognise the achievement of staff is by promoting them – and by that measure we have had a bumper year! This year has seen:

- Dr Alyson Rees promoted to Professor
- Dr David Wilkins promoted to Reader
- Dave Westlake promoted to Senior Research Fellow
- Dr Louise Roberts promoted to Senior Lecturer

We are delighted to see the contributions of these individuals recognised by the University.

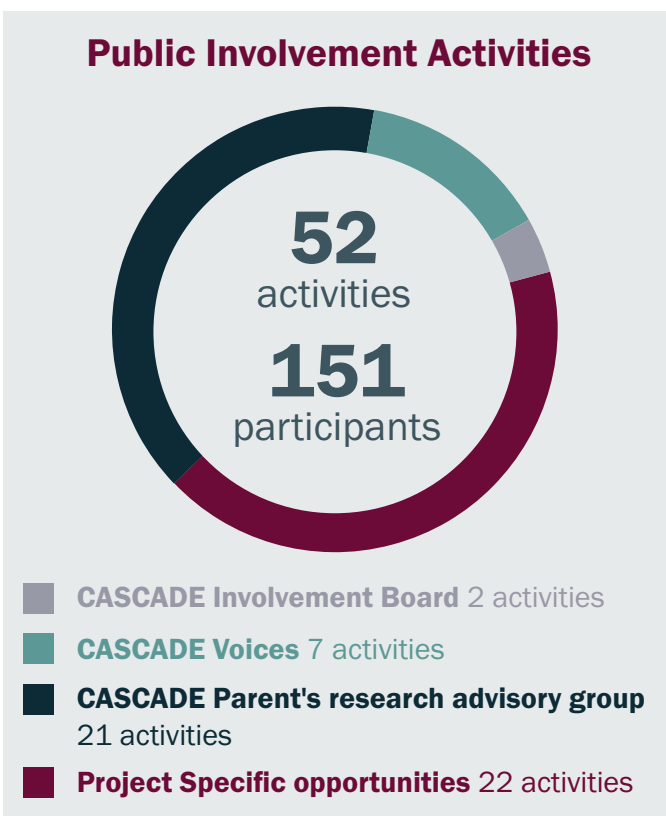
## 5. Public involvement, engagement and dissemination

We have already noted that our work involving children, young people and parents in our work has been one of the highlights of our year. The same is true for our work in engaging the sector with our research and working collaboratively to ensure research can support good practice. In this section we provide more detail on these areas of our work.

### Public involvement

#### CASCADE Involvement Board

We have set up a strategic board of experts by experience to support the development of CASCADE's involvement work. The board have reviewed and monitored our progress as well as offering centre-wide ideas in line with public involvement standards. Members include those with experience of care, adoption, homelessness, fostering and child protection as a parent. The group was established in September 2020 and is currently made up of existing contacts through CASCADE's wider engagement or involvement work.



#### CASCADE Voices

A collaboration between Voices from Care Cymru and CASCADE, a group of care-experienced young people who advise on research projects from design to dissemination. Training in research methods and group facilitation are provided by CASCADE. The continuation of the pandemic proved a challenge for this group. We are still working on how the group will work in the future, and being led by the young people's wishes. Currently the group are meeting every other month in person.

#### CASCADE Parents' Research advisory group

We set up a CASCADE Parents' Research Advisory Group in December 2020. All members of the group have lived experience of children's social care as parents. The group has grown in confidence this year, we have provided opportunities for the group to develop digital skills in March of this year as well as a Mindfulness session. The group has been particularly involved in supporting projects in relation to Parental Advocacy.

The parents shared their experiences of the group, and these were the words they chose:

**new skills** **working together**  
**positive** **inspiring** **useful**  
**helpful** **love the gift boxes**  
**helping others** **information**  
**making changes** **feel inspired**

## Sector engagement and dissemination

ExChange is the all-Wales network for social care research engagement. It covers adult and child social care. The goal is to disseminate and to engage social care practitioners with our research. ExChange delivers a range of training and resources through our conference series, these include workshops, lectures, podcasts and blogs.

This year ExChange has expanded to also cover dissemination activities and conferences for adult social care. In order to ensure that the topics we cover are of importance to the sector we have developed an Adult Social Care Advisory Group, meeting bi-annually this group of key stakeholders provide insight and direction to steer our content provision.

ExChange has continued to grow and develop its reach and has made significant increases in the number of practitioners it has engaged with. This year our engagement activities have reached over **8400** people, an increase of **62%** since Year 1.

Our monthly direct mailing, Bitesize Bulletin, has increased its subscriber base to **1740** members.

*“Being able to access free, world class research which tangibly links to practice, is accessible and inclusive, is invaluable for social workers in Wales. BASW Cymru has always promoted ExChange to our members as a key component of their professional development.”*

**Allison Hulme**

National Director – Wales,  
British Association of Social Workers

Our interview with Kayleigh Llewellyn, BAFTA winning writer of *In My Skin*, an autobiographical BBC drama, had **over 70** people join the YouTube Premier in February 2022 and **550** have viewed it since.

### Engagement Activities



- **Webinars** 4041 people engaged
- **Lectures** 1592 people engaged
- **Blogs** 1472 people engaged
- **Podcast** 814 people engaged
- **Resources** 412 people engaged
- **Research Masterclass** 76 people engaged
- **Advisory groups** 13 people engaged



A discussion between CASCADE academics and Steve Rollnick, co-founder of Motivational Interviewing, attracted **over 200** delegates to the live online event in June 2021 and has been viewed **over 800** times on YouTube.



## 6. Conclusion

The second year of our infrastructure funding has been an exceptional success. Our continued achievements in grant capture provide a strong platform for the continued flourishing of the Partnership and this has been accompanied by the increasing reach of our sector engagement activities, our growing international profile and enhanced involvement of children, young people and parents in our work.

We have exciting initiatives planned for next year, with a particular focus on exploring new ways of engaging sector leaders, deepening our relationships with practitioners and engaging children in shaping our work. This includes meeting with leadership teams in each local authority in Wales to talk about our work. With a small number of local authorities we are carrying out time limited change projects, designed to apply research into practice. We are also developing a model of not-for-profit training delivery that will enable us to work with partners, including practitioners, young people and parents, to deliver training across the United Kingdom. We also plan to enhance the involvement of younger children in shaping our research in some new, creative and enjoyable ways.

In the Autumn we are launching the “Positive Practice” programme, which aims to identify and share positive practice in children’s social care, and where possible evaluate it. We hope we will have more good news about these initiatives to report next year.

This year has not been an easy year for anybody, and many members of the team have found that working through a pandemic, sometimes when they have caring responsibilities or are isolated, has been very hard. Their commitment in difficult circumstances makes the evident success of the Partnership all the more exceptional.

What keeps us all motivated is the hope and the belief that the work we do makes a difference; that the research we do can help those whose job is to help children and families. We hope that this report has given a flavour of not just what we do, but why we do it, and that having read it you will have a sense of the difference that we believe the CASCADE Partnership is making for children and families in Wales and beyond.

**Professor Donald Forrester**

Director, CASCADE Partnership