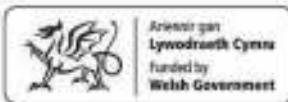




CASCADE Partnership



Ymchwil Iechyd
a Gofal Cymru
Health and Care
Research Wales



Arweiniad gan
Llywodraeth Cymru
Funded by
Welsh Government

2023 - 2024 Annual report





CASCADE Infrastructure Partners



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1. Director's overview

One of my favourite parts of being Director of the CASCADE Partnership is seeing our Annual Report come together. In the busyness of everyday life – and the Partnership is certainly very busy! – it can be easy to lose a sense of the whole. Stepping back to produce the Annual Report provides an opportunity to review and appreciate all the hard work from so many people that has created another successful year.

There are many areas we might focus on, but we have chosen two: research focused on equalities, diversity and social justice; and our international reach. Research in social care always has, as the name suggests, a social element. Issues of inequality, diversity and social justice are core themes for our work. However this year we want to showcase this element of our work. To do that we have selected projects relating to the intersection of parental risk factors with poverty, ethnicity and gender; autistic children in care; ethnic minority children in the Welsh child welfare system; and the evaluation of the Basic Income Pilot for care leavers.

Our international work has been growing rapidly, with visits from scholars and students from Sweden, Finland, Norway, Italy, China and the USA in recent months. This reflects the growing international profile of the CASCADE Partnership and recognition of our developing methodological expertise. This was confirmed in our leading role in setting up the Best Childhoods Centre in Copenhagen – a £38 million investment in improving the use and understanding of research by the professions who work with children in Denmark. I am delighted to be the Founding Research Director, helping establish the intellectual foundations for the work. Others from CASCADE will be involved with this ambitious programme of work as it is finalised later in 2024 and beyond.

This year is also a year for reflection and celebration beyond the last 12 months – because CASCADE is 10 years old in 2024. Of course, I am tremendously proud of the work we have done and the difference I think we are making, but the confluence of this landmark and having to put in proposals for the next five years of funding has resulted in significant collective reflection on where CASCADE and the Partnership may go in the future. In next year's report we will outline what these plans involve, but for now it is enough to say that they involve building on what we already do well, developing exciting new areas of work and growing not just as a Partnership but also by developing new partner centres and organisations: an approach we are calling networked growth.

At the 10th anniversary celebration Cardiff University's new Vice Chancellor Wendy Larner said that the CASCADE Partnership exemplified her vision of a university with a global civic mission. By this she meant that the CASCADE Partnership has roots deep in Wales and our sector, but through this we are able to engage and have influence internationally. This is a great description of our aspirations and our strategic plans for the next 10 years – and it is reassuring to know they are a good fit with the intended direction for our parent institution.

I hope that you find this summary of some elements of our work from 2023 to 2024 interesting and useful.

Donald Forrester
Director of CASCADE Partnership



'CASCADE is just such a fantastic example of the kind of work that Cardiff does best... what a global civic university does is deeply engaged work in the place that it's in, but then it uses that to speak out to the world, to make a difference to the world. So not just making a difference in its place, but really working to show the world the difference that place-based work can make. And I can't think of a better example than CASCADE of that kind of work'

Professor Wendy Lerner
Vice Chancellor, Cardiff University.

2. Who's Who, Governance, Partnerships

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 away days 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 Developmental Psychology and the Head of the School of Psychology at Cardiff University. She is working with Lorna Stabler (CASCADE) and Amy Paine (Psychology) on a Nuffield Foundation funded

study of Special Guardianships to advance our understanding of family life and support needs.

3. Summary of the year

Core Metrics

Reporting period: **2023/2024**



Health and Care Research Wales infrastructure award to the group



Direct funding awarded

£524k

Jobs created through direct funding



Grants won during reporting period

| Grants won | Led by group | Group collaborating |
|-----------------------------------|--------------|---------------------|
| Number | 13 | 9 |
| Value | £2.6m | £40.1m |
| Funding to Wales | £1.8m | £2.2m |
| Funding to group | £1.8m | £1.8m |
| Additional jobs created for Wales | 21 | 7 |
| Additional jobs created for group | 17 | 3 |



Number of publications



Number of public engagement events



Number of public involvement opportunities



CASCADE policy engagement and impact

CASCADE has had another successful year of policy engagement and impact. Highlights include:



In May 2023, multiple citations to CASCADE research findings from several different research projects were included in the Senedd's Children, Young People and Education Scrutiny Committee enquiry report about Services for Care-Experienced Children: Exploring radical reform (senedd.wales)

In June 2023, the Welsh Government responded formally to the Petitions Committee report on Care Experienced Parents, accepting 'in principle' that local authorities should adopt the CASCADE parents' charter, which emerged from funded research and co-production with our parents public involvement group: <https://senedd.wales/media/1sjpgh15/gen-ld15892-e.pdf>.

Following consultation with senior Welsh Government officials about their evidence needs, since February 2024, CASCADE has been leading monthly bespoke closed seminars for senior Welsh Government officials to inform the current children's social care reform programme. These have been well-attended and officials have been provided with the opportunity to hear unpublished and recently-published findings and engage in discussion about evidence-based policy-development and implementation of reforms.

In February 2024, a consultation event was hosted by CASCADE to inform current research on supporting children with a parent in prison, led by Alyson Rees. Attendees included the Children's Commissioner for Wales, representatives from the Ministry for Justice, His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service and Welsh Government, prison officers and other professionals, as well as people with lived experience of caring for a child in their family when a parent was in prison.



In February 2024, Sally Holland gave evidence at a session of the UK Covid Inquiry, on the topic of children's experiences during the pandemic, and government and public services responses.

In March 2024, Nina Maxwell submitted evidence on behalf of CASCADE to the Senedd Children, Young Person's and Education Committee's inquiry into the exploitation of children.

In April 2024, Sally Holland submitted evidence to the Canadian House of Representative's Committee which was debating the repeal of legislation allowing parents to physically punish children.



Individual CASCADE researchers have continued to engage with the policy sector. This includes researchers sitting on a range of Boards and advisory groups, including the National Adoption Governance Board, Boards of Trustees for the Family Rights Group and Voices from Care, the Welsh Government Anti-Slavery Training and Awareness Group and the Wales Youth Justice Academic Advisory Group. A CASCADE representative will sit on the Strategic Advisory Panel for the Welsh Government's National Office for Care and Support.

Researchers are also often consulted by individual government departments, parliamentary researchers and local authorities to discuss research evidence and evaluation methods. As one example, over the last year, Dr Martin Elliott held meetings with the residential childcare team in the Department for Education and with Social Work England in relation to the scoping of the response to the MacAllister review recommendation to register residential workers.

International reach

New International Research Centre for Children's Social Care to Ensure the Best Start in Life

Cardiff University's Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre (CASCADE) is proud to announce its involvement in an ambitious international collaboration aimed at improving the well-being of young children. Professor Donald Forrester of CASCADE will be part of the initial management team and play a crucial role in setting up the Centre for Better Childhoods, a pioneering initiative by University College Copenhagen (UCC).

This new interdisciplinary research centre, supported by the Novo Nordisk Foundation, the LEGO Foundation, and the TrygFonden, represents a significant investment in the future of children's welfare. With grants totalling up to DKK 250 million over the next decade, the Centre for Better Childhoods aims to ensure that all children receive the best possible start in life.

Children's early years are crucial for their development and future success. The Centre will focus on integrating research with practical applications to enhance the support provided by welfare professionals such as, midwives, health nurses, social workers, and physiotherapists. By fostering a holistic approach, the Centre seeks to create a robust knowledge base that will directly impact the training and practices of these professionals.

The Centre for Better Childhoods will be the first major fund-financed research centre of its kind located at a university college in Denmark. This strategic placement ensures that the research findings will be seamlessly integrated into the education of future welfare professionals, thereby improving the quality of care and support for young children and their families.

"Today, there is already strong research in this area, but we aim to create holistic solutions that encompass all professionals involved in the early years of children's lives," said Dean Annegrete Juul from the Faculty of Social Education, Social Work, and Administration at UCC. "Our goal is to enhance professional practices to better support young children and their families."

Professor Forrester and CASCADE bring extensive experience in children's social care research to this international collaboration. Their involvement underscores the centre's commitment to applying evidence-based practices to real-world challenges, ensuring that the knowledge generated will be directly beneficial to children and families.

The Centre for Better Childhoods will officially open in August 2024, with a series of activities planned at University College Copenhagen to mark the occasion. CASCADE's participation in this venture highlights the importance of international cooperation in advancing the field of children's well-being and ensuring that every child has the opportunity to thrive.

Our international connections



KEY

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

4. Spotlight on selected research projects

CASCADE research on inequalities

Since its founding in 2014 CASCADE research has included a focus on inequalities, with two studies, both funded by the Nuffield Foundation – Social Work Over Time and the Child Welfare Inequalities Project. The latter led to further funded case studies in Wales and currently there is a strong portfolio of studies that are profiled below and cover various different aspects of inequalities – gender, ethnicity, poverty and neurodiversity. There is also the major evaluation of the innovative basic income for care leavers. These projects rely on the combined input of CASCADE, the Centre for Trials Research, the School of Psychology and data linkage expertise in Swansea University.

Evaluation of the Basic Income Pilot

There has been a surge in basic income schemes around the world in recent years, and the Basic Income for Care Leavers in Wales Pilot is unique among them. It is the most generous to date and only the second in the world to target young people as they leave care. Over 600 young people across Wales are receiving £1,600 per month (£1,280 after tax) for two years following their 18th birthday, along with financial support which is part of the pilot. Take up of the pilot has been high, with 97% of eligible young people enrolling to receive basic income payments.

This evaluation, which is commissioned by the Welsh Government, is led by Sally Holland and David Westlake at CASCADE, alongside colleagues at Kings College London, University of Oxford, University of York, and Northumbria University. This is a large and complex evaluation which uses a quasi-experimental design to test impact and value-for-money. In addition, it includes a multi-method implementation and process evaluation. Through this we aim to provide a robust account of the difference a basic income makes to care leavers in Wales.

Baseline data suggests this group are similar to other care leavers of the same age, and early findings suggest that professionals involved in delivering the pilot are broadly supportive of care leavers receiving a basic income, but have concerns about the vulnerability of some recipients. Many felt that some element of conditionality would improve the pilot, though they also highlighted the increased opportunities the pilot offered to young people.

The pilot is a radical intervention and the complexities of delivering it will become clearer as the evaluation progresses. It is no surprise that both the pilot and the evaluation has garnered significant political and media attention, in Wales and further afield. The incoming First Minister spoke about it at length in his first scrutiny session. We expect this profile to grow even further in the next few years as the findings from the evaluation are published, and will report these annually until the end of the study in 2027.





Parental Risk Factors and Entering Care

A number of parental problems had previously been associated with children entering care. These include mental health problems, substance misuse and learning disabilities. However there were many things about the relationship between these issues in parents and children's entry into care that were not known. For example, do these factors have the same effect on the likelihood of care if they occur in mothers or fathers or if they occur in areas of high or low deprivation? How much do the characteristics of the child affect the impact of these factors, and do any changes in the prevalence of these factors explain the increases in children entering care?

Nell Warner's study on Parental Risk Factors and Children Entering Care was funded by Health and Care Research Wales to look at these issues. This was a collaboration with the Centre for Trials Research, and Swansea and Lancaster Universities. It used routinely collected data from social services in Wales and linked it to data from health and education, to look at the households children were living in before they entered care. It looked at the risk factors in the adults living in those households as well as child characteristics.

A range of risk factors were considered including substance misuse, mental health problems, violence at home, learning disabilities and different types of neurodivergence.

Most of the risk factors looked at increased likelihood of children entering care. However, the study also found a number of additional important findings. These include that the majority of risks have more of an impact on the likelihood of care when they occur in mothers rather than fathers, and have differing effects for children from different ethnic minorities. We also found evidence that higher levels of risk factors partially explain why children from areas of high deprivation are more likely to enter care, and that when all risk factors are taken into account, then children from all ethnic minorities are more likely to enter care than the white majority population. The findings also suggested that some of the increasing numbers of children entering care could be associated with increases in anxiety and depression in the population.

ERICA – Ethnic and Religious Inequalities in Child Welfare: Patterns and Outcomes

This study aims to investigate patterns and trends of ethnic and religious inequalities in children's social services in Wales. Working closely with the Ethnic Minorities Youth Support Team (EYST), a diverse service user panel was set up involving existing and potential ethnic minority users of social services throughout the life span of the project. We have also collaborated with the Secure Anonymised Information Linkage (SAIL) Databank at Swansea University to capitalize on administrative data of population level to produce, for the first time, the much-needed quantitative evidence on the little-known experiences of ethnic and religious minority families receiving social services support.

Initial findings show the trend of ethnic disproportionality, which captures the level of ethnic representation in the child welfare system compared to the overall child population, to be distinct from the changes in the absolute number of children in the child social welfare system by ethnicity over the years 2011-2020. Mixed-heritage children were the most overrepresented and Asian children the most underrepresented, with fluctuations in the level over time.

Black children also fluctuated between over- and under-representation through the years. The overall level of ethnic disproportionality in Wales increased from 2011-2016, and then decreased from 2017-2020. Ethnic disproportionality also appeared more pronounced among girls, and in age groups 0-4 and 16-17.

To date, there is only very limited research in the UK examining the educational outcomes and health service use of ethnic and religious minority children receiving social care support. Using linked administrative data in social care, education and health, this study will explore how ethnicity, religion and social service experiences together shape children's GCSE attainment and health service use pattern. This research aligns with the Welsh Government's policy priority of reducing care entry, as well as with its Anti-Racist Action Plan. The findings will inform the effective organisation and delivery of social care services in Wales among ethnic and religious minority children and families who are in need of services.



How can we improve the experiences and outcomes of autistic children in care? A mixed methods study of needs, services and good practice

The aim of this project, supported by the School of Psychology, is to understand more about autistic children in foster and kinship care across Wales. It is known that children in care are more likely to be neurodivergent or have additional education needs. We also know there are challenges distinguishing some of the subtle differences between autistic traits and trauma or attachment disorder. This study will increase our knowledge and understanding of this vulnerable and under-researched group to enable us to know more about their needs, their carers' needs, and how we can best support them moving forwards.

This research is divided into three main parts. The first part uses the SAIL databank to undertake data linkage to understand the numbers of children in care with a diagnosis of autism, and to understand more about the patterns of diagnosis compared to children not in care. In addition, further data linkage will tell us about the outcomes of these care-experienced autistic children into adulthood.

The second part of the project is a survey distributed to foster and kinship carers across Wales to identify levels of autistic traits, levels of attachment disorder, and other strengths and difficulties for children currently in care.

The third part is a large piece of qualitative work involving interviews with foster and kinship carers and social work staff in three local authorities across Wales. This will enable a deeper understanding of the current strengths and challenges around diagnosis and support for autistic children in care, both those with and without a current diagnosis.

Preliminary findings from this research are identifying a large number of children in care with high levels of autistic traits, but no diagnosis. In addition, difficulties regarding getting the correct diagnosis for vulnerable children have been identified by both social workers and foster/ kinship carers. This highlights the importance of research for this vulnerable group and how best to support them moving forwards.





5. CASCADE Celebrates 10 years of excellence in children's social care research

In May 2024 we celebrated our 10-year anniversary with a memorable event attended by staff and key stakeholders. The celebration marked a decade of impactful research and collaboration aimed at improving children's social care in Wales and beyond.

We extend our heartfelt thanks to our funders, Health and Care Research Wales, for their unwavering support. Their contributions have been instrumental in our success, and we look forward to continuing our impactful work over the next 10 years.



Event highlights

Rapid-fire presentations

Attendees enjoyed dynamic presentations highlighting some of the centre's key research projects over the past decade. These presentations showcased the breadth and depth of CASCADE's work and its significant contributions to the field.

Interactive timeline

A visually engaging timeline displayed photos, memories, and key achievements from the past 10 years, allowing guests to reflect on CASCADE's journey and milestones.



Keynote speakers

Dawn Bowden MS: The Welsh Minister for Social Services delivered an inspiring keynote speech, emphasising the crucial impact of CASCADE’s research on policy and practice within Wales.

Wendy Larner: The Vice Chancellor of Cardiff University spoke about the concept of Global Civic Mission and how CASCADE is deeply embedded in the local community, influencing local policy changes while also having an increasingly international reach.

Founding Director **Sally Holland** reflected on how the Centre has grown since its early days in 2014 and current Director **Donald Forrester** spoke about the centre’s current strengths and bright future. Both emphasised the importance of keeping young people and parents who have lived experience of social care at the heart of CASCADE’s work.



6. Public Involvement and Engagement

Public Involvement

Our Strategic CASCADE Public Involvement Board has added new members, diversifying the lived experiences on the board and adding social work experience. The board is transitioning to take on a bigger role at CASCADE and we're excited for the next steps.

The CASCADE Voices care-experienced research advisory group run in partnership with Voices From Care Cymru continues to make sure our research includes the voices of young people. They have been critically reviewing new grants in Dragons' Den style sessions and challenging researchers to think differently about outcomes for young people.

The CASCADE Parents Research Advisory Group have presented at conferences on the importance of involving seldom heard voices in research and how to go about this. They have also been busy celebrating all their hard work through creating pottery and team building events.

[Crafting Connections: A Day of Pottery with CASCADE Parents - CASCADE \(cascadewales.org\)](#)



Public Involvement Participants



| | |
|---|--|
|  | CASCADE Involvement Board 18 participants |
|  | CASCADE Voices 39 participants |
|  | CASCADE Parent's research advisory group 80 participants |
|  | Research opportunities 120 participants |

Public Involvement project highlights

Welsh Basic Income Pilot co-production group

This group run with Voices From Care Cymru continues to work alongside the research team to advise and support this important evaluation in Wales. They have already been hugely helpful by supporting the design of the interview materials and survey questions.

"Thanks so much to all of those involved, especially members who travel a long way to attend meetings or give up their time on a Saturday after a long week in work, college or apprenticeships."

Prof Sally Holland (from the blog)

[Advice, support and challenge: Co-production in the Evaluation of the Welsh Basic Income Pilot for Care Leavers – CASCADE \(cascadewales.org\)](https://cascadewales.org)



Film premiere

We were thrilled to premiere films co-produced with young people about harmful relationships and crime. The young people were so inspiring and brave for taking part in this work and we are hopefully they will be a great tool for education and awareness raising.

[Film premiere: Harmful relationships and crime – CASCADE \(cascadewales.org\)](https://cascadewales.org)

Kinship carer research and policy group:

This year was the launch of this new group run by AFKA Cymru and Kinship. CASCADE are excited to see what the inclusion of these valuable voices can have in our research and wider work.

"As a kinship care researcher, I couldn't do my job without being able to speak with families to ensure I design research that answers the right questions for them."

Lorna Stabler (from the blog)

Blog here: [Kinship Carer Research and Policy Advisory Group – CASCADE \(cascadewales.org\)](https://cascadewales.org)

ExChange Wales

ExChange has celebrated another year of network growth and informative, impactful events.

Adoption was one of our key themes this year. In the summer we ran the 'Reframing Adoption' conference series which proved to be our most popular and engaging of the year, featuring high profile presenters from around the UK. One of the highlights was the creative art and photography project involving adopted children and young people from the Adoption UK Mid Wales group.

The year ended with a memorable and highly impactful hybrid Adoption Lecture given by Professor Laura Machin of Lancaster University, about her Adoption Advocacy Research Project. The research gives a much-needed voice to adopters, to help inform better support and practice. Prof Machin reflected *"The Adoption Lecture has catapulted our research into a new domain and it is wonderful to now be engaging in conversations with senior influential figures in the adoption world. I'm incredibly grateful to have been granted that platform from Alyson [Rees], and I very much hope I can get to Cardiff again and spend longer with colleagues there at the research centre"*.

Our mental health conference series spanned both children's and adult social care, with presentations ranging from the mental health of care-experienced children, through to building social networks for adults experiencing mental health issues. We also had a variety of standalone webinars on both quantitative and qualitative research, from CASCADE researchers and our partners such as Swansea University colleagues. The set up of the Centre for Adult Social Care Research (CARE) has brought about new opportunities for collaborative working and disseminating social care research across the lifespan.

Whilst delivery of ExChange continued to be mostly online, the past year saw an increase in in-person events delivered by and attended by ExChange. It was a great pleasure to run in-person workshops on anti-racist practice in children's social care, in both Cardiff and Bangor, and supported by a webinar. And as mentioned above, we were able to offer the adoption lecture as hybrid, giving our audience the option to attend in person or online.

To maximise our face to face interaction with new and existing audiences, we took the opportunity to host stands and promote ExChange at external conferences including those run by Social Care Wales, the British Association of Social Workers (BASW), Health and Care Research Wales, and Community Housing Cymru, ASPIRE and the Neath Port Talbot Championing Research team, as well as the National Social Care Conference. This took us across Wales from Cardiff to Llandudno, Swansea to Bangor, creating dialogue with social care practitioners and people with lived experience, about how we can support their practice and development needs.



Media highlights



Webpage views

55,699



New followers

528



Videos watched

12,530



Exchange network

1,775

Engagement activities



- Blogs 21
- Online webinars 16
- Videos 38
- Bulletins 12
- Conference stands 9
- Workshops 2





6. Conclusion

The CASCADE Partnership is a joy to be part of. It is full of energy and enthusiasm – combined with expertise – and I hope these pages have illustrated this. The range of projects is something that still amazes me, and to see the substantial contribution we are making to national and international conversations about children’s social care is a source of profound satisfaction.

I have the good fortune to be writing this “endpiece” from the beautiful (though rainy!) hills of Chianti, just outside Siena. Most years I provide teaching on evaluative research methods to social work PhD students in Italy. I mention it not to inspire jealousy, but because today I shared some of the work we do at CASCADE. Seeing the surprise at the scale of our portfolio and the number of PhD students we have makes one realise how unusual and groundbreaking the CASCADE Partnership is. Sometimes seeing ourselves through the eyes of others can make us appreciate things anew, and I felt a bit amazed by what we were doing. I hope that some sense of that is conveyed through our annual report.

All of this is only achieved because of the excellent group of people across the Partnership who make it happen – and I am particularly grateful that we have expertise from one or more of SAIL, the Centre for Trials Research and the School of Psychology in most of the Partnership projects.

I am also hugely aware that while researchers tend to get the accolades, the achievements outlined here are only possible because of our incredible professional services team, who make things happen so smoothly and efficiently allowing researchers and Centre Directors to get on with doing research.

Next year is the last year of current Infrastructure funding, and I hope we will be able to report not only on our first five years but also our plans for the next five years. These are, in my opinion, really exciting. They involve setting up new collaborations, developing innovative areas of research and supporting the next generation of researchers to become leaders. I hope we will have exciting plans and ideas to report on about ways that CASCADE can develop a network of organisations with expertise and interest in making a positive difference to child and families in Wales and beyond.

Professor Donald Forrester
Director, CASCADE Partnership