



Ymchwil Iechyd
a Gofal Cymru
Health and Care
Research Wales



Ariennir gan
Lywodraeth Cymru
Funded by
Welsh Government

2020-2025 End of award report





CASCADE Infrastructure Partners



Centre for
Trials Research
Canolfan
Ymchwil Treialon



School of Psychology
Ysgol Seicoleg



Contents

1. Director's Overview.....	03
2. Who's Who, Governance, Partnerships.....	05
3. Summary of the Award.....	06
Achievements and Areas of Impact.....	08
4. Key Themes from the Past Five Years.....	11
Creation: Building New Foundations for Research and Innovation.....	12
Collaboration: Working Together for Better Social Care	16
Change: Making a Difference, Informing Policy and Impacting Practice.....	19
Capacity: Fostering the Future of Social Care Research.....	22
5. Public Involvement, Engagement and Dissemination	24
Public Involvement: Amplifying Lived Experience in Research.....	25
Engagement and Dissemination.....	26
6. Conclusion.....	28

1. Director's Overview

This report marks the end of the first five years of infrastructure funding from Welsh Government, through Health and Care Research Wales, for the CASCADE Partnership, and thus provides an opportunity to reflect on achievements and plan for the next five years and beyond. By any metric our first five years have been successful: We led 84 successful bids with a total worth of over £12 million and were involved with a further 30 awards worth £65 million in research income. In total, this has funded 193 equivalent whole-time roles in Wales. There are also strong grounds for thinking that this success is making a difference. In academic metrics, such as number of publications and citations of our work, we have seen extraordinary growth. More importantly, given our focus on practice, there are many examples of the positive influence we are having in Wales and beyond, several of which are described in this report. We have also been successful in developing staff, including 19 promotions (six to Professorial level) and 20+ PhDs. This is vital in ensuring we can sustain our success.

The CASCADE Partnership has also been very successful at growing other organisations. We helped found the CARE Centre for Adult Social Care Research, which is going from strength to strength. The all-Wales research engagement network for social care, ExChange has thrived and become independent. We helped set up the exciting new Social Care and Artificial Intelligence Learning Centre (SCALE) and we are supporting the National Centre for Suicide and Self-harm Research. Such developmental work is now international with a key role in supporting the foundation of the Better Childhoods Centre in Copenhagen, Denmark. A less obvious but perhaps equally important development is that Professor David Wilkins, a key CASCADE member, is now leading the social work course at Cardiff, and many of the ideas and practices from our research are informing teaching the next generation of social workers – and perhaps future social care researchers. The difference that CASCADE makes is therefore not merely about the research we do but also our capacity to support others in doing research and teaching in similar areas that will benefit children and their families.

These successes show the difference that sustained support and funding can make. We are fortunate that Cardiff University and the School of Social Sciences have allowed dedicated academic time to lead CASCADE, and we hope that we are an indication of the return that such investments can make. Even more importantly Health and Care Research Wales showed both a willingness to try something new in funding us, and a continued openness to new ideas and opportunities. We hope this report provides an indication of the success that such investment can produce – generating not only positive differences for families but also research capacity in Wales.

Yet, while this report quite rightly focuses on our various successes from the last 5 years, the current moment feels rife with challenges. In Cardiff University and across Higher Education money is limited, jobs are at risk and there is the possibility of strike action and other disruptions. While the situation is less acute in the field we serve – that is Children's Social Care – that is perhaps because a state of crisis has become chronic. There are certainly no grounds for complacency. In Wales rates of children in care remain exceptionally high, there are difficulties in recruiting and retaining social workers and there is little evidence of sustained high-quality practice. England, Scotland and Northern Ireland are also experiencing serious systemic pressures.

In such circumstances there is a responsibility for research centres to show that we can make a positive difference. We must not just do research but also work in partnership with policy makers, leaders, practitioners and those who use services to create positive changes. Our mission in the next five years is to do just that, by building on the exceptional achievements of our first five years of Health and Care Research Wales funding and to continue to create and evaluate new ideas about how we can do children's social care. So this Report has two functions – it is a celebration of what we have achieved, but it is also a promissory note of our intentions for the next 5 years and beyond - as the CASCADE Partnership strives to help children, families and workers by producing high quality research to support and improve children's social care.

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 Larner
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.



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.



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).



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.



Lucy Griffiths is Professor of Paediatric Epidemiology at Swansea University Medical School. She leads the Swansea children's social care data linkage work for the Partnership.



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



Alyson Rees is a Professor in Social Work. Alyson previously led our all Wales social care research engagement work – known as ExChange



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 Award

The past five years have marked a period of exceptional growth, innovation, and influence for the CASCADE Partnership. Funded by Welsh Government, through a Health and Care Research Wales infrastructure award, the Partnership brings together three leading institutions: Cardiff University's Centre for Trials Research, the School of Psychology, and Swansea University's SAIL Databank, coordinated by the Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre (CASCADE).

Together, we have created a vibrant and collaborative environment where research, data science, and psychological insight intersect to drive improvements in children's social care. This collaboration enables a truly interdisciplinary approach, supporting large-scale evaluations, pioneering data-linkage studies, and co-produced research with people with lived experience.

Across the award period, we have significantly expanded our research portfolio, developed new centres and networks, supported early career researchers, and influenced key areas of policy and practice in Wales and beyond. We've embedded public involvement throughout our work and supported knowledge sharing through ExChange Wales, ensuring our research reaches practitioners, policymakers, and communities.

Core Metrics

Reporting period: 2020/2025

Health and Care Research Wales infrastructure award to the group



Direct
funding
awarded

£2.6m

Jobs created
through direct
funding



Grants won during reporting period

Grants won	Led by group	Group collaborating
Number	84	30
Value	£12.2m	£65m
Funding to Wales	£10.5m	£21.7m
Funding to group	£10.4m	£6.4m
Additional jobs created for Wales	103	90
Additional jobs created for group	98	33



Number of publications



Number of public
engagement events



Number of public
involvement opportunities

Achievements and Areas of Impact

2020–2021



Major success in grant capture and portfolio diversification.

The CASCADE Partnership secured 16 new grants totalling £2.2 million, including the largest RCT in UK children's social care and studies on exploitation, data linkage, and care prevention.

Research-led policy dialogue with the Independent Review in England.

CASCADE contributed evidence to the national Care Review in England, with Donald Forrester sitting on the Review's Evidence Panel.

Foundation of ExChange as a national research engagement network.

Infrastructure funding secured ExChange's future as an all-Wales dissemination platform, offering flexible online content for busy practitioners.

Early expansion of international collaborations.

Partnerships were established with Denmark, Finland, and Italy, and Fulbright Fellow Professor Heather Taussig joined CASCADE from the USA.

2021–2022

The CASCADE Partnership led key research on mental health in children in care.

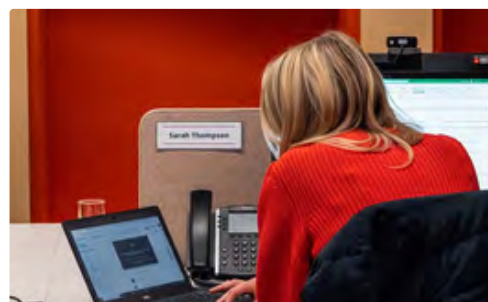
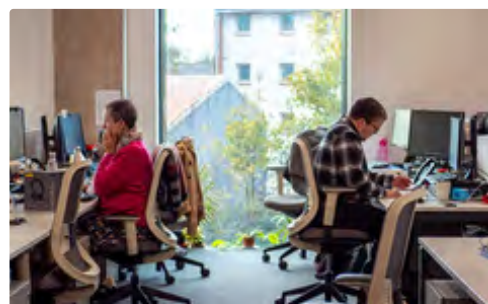
Professor Katherine Shelton joined a £2.8m UKRI-funded collaboration on the mental health and wellbeing of children in care at transition points.

Martin Elliott recognised for research excellence.

His article on poverty and care rates in Wales won Article of the Year from both the British Journal of Social Work and the European Social Work Research Association.

The CASCADE Partnership supported the development of PhD students and Post Doctorates.

Continued focus on research capacity included mentorship, bid development support, and wider leadership training across the partnership. The Partnership supports around 50-60 PhD and Post-Doctorate students at any given time.



Key achievements and areas of impact

2022–2023

Parents' Charter gained national and international attention.

Co-produced with parents, the Charter was endorsed in principle by Welsh Government and adopted or engaged with by all 22 Welsh LAs, as well as stakeholders in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

The CASCADE Partnership evidence featured centrally in the Senedd's 2023 radical reform inquiry.

We submitted findings from 10 studies and our public involvement groups. The resulting report cited the CASCADE Partnership throughout and mirrored several of our recommendations.

High-level UK policy influence.

Nina Maxwell gave evidence to the UK Parliament on child criminal exploitation and knife crime (March 2023). Sally Holland submitted expert advice to Canadian legislators on banning physical punishment of children.

Welsh Government consultation responses and engagement.

Sally Holland contributed to the consultation on removing profit from children's care services, and senior government officials visited CASCADE for briefings on priority areas.

Public and closed evidence sessions at the Senedd.

CASCADE Partnership researchers—including Louise Roberts, Helen Hodges, Hannah Bayfield, and David Westlake—provided evidence on issues from family justice to education and care-experienced parents.

Influential contributors

Jonathan Scourfield and Sally Holland, two academic researchers who were named among the top 100 most influential contributors to social work journals, reinforcing CASCADE's role as a leader in the field.

2023–2024

Complex Safeguarding Toolkit cited in Senedd recommendations.

Our resources on child criminal exploitation were recommended for national use in the 2024 Children on the Margins inquiry report.

SWIS evaluation influenced UK Government budget decisions.

Our research was cited by the UK Treasury as it highlighted an example of a costly intervention not delivering results, leading to discontinued funding.

International media and public impact.

The CASCADE Partnership work on care-experienced parents and policy reform was featured in BBC News and other major media outlets.

Research informed national family court practice.

A CASCADE report was cited in new Family Justice Council guidance on responding to allegations of parental alienation, covered by the BBC and expected to shape future rulings.

2024–2025

World-leading evaluation of Wales' Basic Income Pilot.

CASCADE continues to lead the evaluation of this flagship policy for care leavers, with results informing national and international debates on welfare reform.

National evidence seminars embedded in Welsh policymaking.

Monthly closed sessions have been held with senior Welsh Government officials, sharing pre-publication findings to support ongoing social care reforms.

Dementia and adoption conference series brought lived experience to the fore.

ExChange hosted impactful events including the hybrid Adoption Lecture and a dementia-focused series amplifying the voices of those affected.



Advisory roles across UK and Welsh institutions.

The CASCADE Partnership staff advised UK Government departments (DEFRA, DfE), Welsh NHS CAMHS, youth justice reform, modern slavery, and Welsh Government data strategy groups.

Sustained public involvement leadership.

Our Involvement Board, CASCADE Voices, and Parents' Group shaped research priorities and engagement approaches across the Centre.

Researchers contributed to Wales' UNCRC reporting.

Helen Hodges co-authored the Welsh monitoring group's submission to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

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

In May 2024, CASCADE marked its 10-year anniversary with a celebration event attended by staff and key stakeholders. The event recognised a decade of impactful research, collaboration, and policy influence in Wales and internationally.

New research centres established and strengthened through the CASCADE Partnership.

CARE (Centre for Adult Social Care Research) and SCALE (Social Care and Artificial Intelligence Learning Centre) were launched with support from the CASCADE Partnership, while ExChange Wales entered its next phase of becoming a fully independent knowledge hub. The CASCADE Partnership also contributed to the creation of Denmark's £38 million Better Childhoods Centre, expanding its international reach and impact.



4. Key Themes from the Past Five Years

Our Four Pillars of Progress

Our work is characterised by four interconnected themes that reflect our strategic focus and the breadth of our activity over the past five years. Together, these capture our mission to improve children's social care through high quality research that makes a difference.

- **Creation** - We are committed to developing new research approaches and innovative methodologies that respond to emerging challenges and sector needs.
- **Collaboration** - We are dedicated to working alongside those with lived experience, as well as with academic, policy, and practice partners, to produce research that is meaningful and grounded in reality.
- **Change** - Our research informs and influences policy, practice, and public debate, creating tangible improvements in systems, services, and support.
- **Capacity** - We develop the next generation of social care researchers, investing in academic and professional service careers, and growing our network of research centres across Wales and beyond.

Creation: Building New Foundations for Research and Innovation

Expanding Research Excellence: Establishing New Centres

Over the past five years, the CASCADE Partnership has not only strengthened its own research capacity but has also played a pivotal role in establishing new research centres that expand the breadth and depth of social care research in Wales and beyond. These new initiatives reflect a strategic vision for growth, ensuring that high-quality research continues to inform policy and practice while addressing critical gaps in knowledge and service provision.



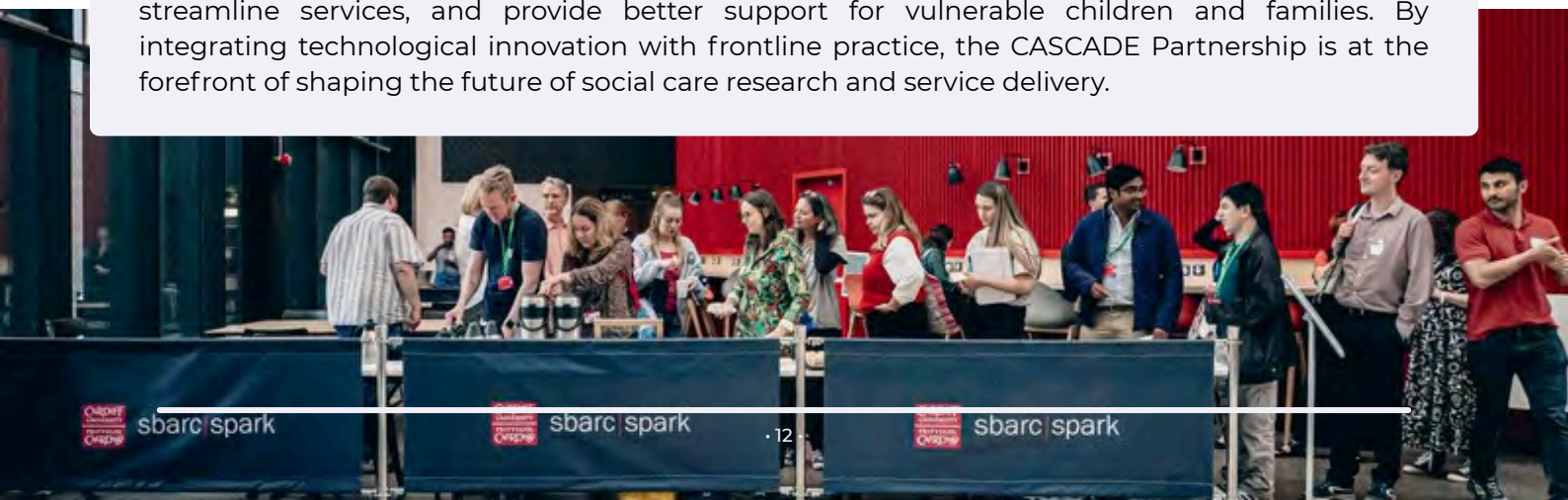
Centre for Adult Social Care Research
Canolfan Ymchwil Gofal Cymdeithasol i Oedolion

The Centre for Adult Social Care Research (CARE)

A new research centre dedicated to adult social care in Wales. Led by Professor Paul Willis, CARE will work alongside the CASCADE Partnership to advance understanding of adult and family social care services, workforce challenges, and policy reform. The two centres collaborate on key areas such as social care transitions, intergenerational research, and evidence-based policy recommendations.

SCALE: Social Care and Artificial Intelligence Learning Centre

In 2024, CASCADE became a key partner in SCALE (Social Care and Artificial Intelligence Learning Centre), a £1.8 million research initiative that aims to harness artificial intelligence (AI) and data science to improve social care outcomes. Funded by Health and Care Research Wales, SCALE will explore how machine learning and AI-driven insights can be used to enhance decision-making, streamline services, and provide better support for vulnerable children and families. By integrating technological innovation with frontline practice, the CASCADE Partnership is at the forefront of shaping the future of social care research and service delivery.



ExChange: A Knowledge Hub for CASCADE, CARE, and SCALE



ExChange Wales continues to serve as a vital knowledge hub, ensuring that research from CASCADE, CARE, and SCALE and other research is shared, accessible, and impactful. Through conferences, webinars, podcasts, and online resources, ExChange bridges the gap between research, policy, and practice, making evidence-based insights available to practitioners, policymakers, and people with lived experience.

With CARE focusing on adult social care and SCALE pioneering AI-driven research, ExChange Wales will connect these centres, fostering collaboration and ensuring findings reach those who can drive real-world change. As the partnership grows, ExChange Wales will remain a cornerstone of its dissemination and engagement strategy, translating research into action.



The Best Childhoods Centre in Denmark

The CASCADE Partnership's global influence continues to grow with its involvement in the Best Childhoods Centre in Denmark. This £38 million interdisciplinary initiative will enhance early childhood care and education by improving research translation into practice. CASCADE Director Professor Donald Forrester serves as Founding Research Director, ensuring that cutting-edge social care research informs international best practices.



Evaluating the Basic Income Pilot: A Groundbreaking Initiative for Care Leavers

In 2022, the Welsh Government launched the Basic Income for Care Leavers Pilot, a first-of-its-kind initiative in the UK, offering young people leaving care a guaranteed income of £1,600 per month (£1,280 after tax) for two years. This ambitious scheme aims to improve financial stability, well-being, and long-term outcomes for care-experienced young people as they transition into adulthood. CASCADE, in collaboration with leading research institutions, was commissioned to evaluate the pilot's impact, ensuring that the policy is informed by robust evidence and lived experience.

A Comprehensive Evaluation Approach

The evaluation, led by Professor Sally Holland and Dr. David Westlake, is one of the most rigorous assessments of a basic income policy globally. The research team is using a multi-method approach, combining:

- Quasi-experimental analysis to compare the pilot group with care leavers who are not receiving the basic income.
- Longitudinal surveys and interviews to track financial well-being, mental health, housing stability, and employment outcomes.
- Implementation and process evaluation to assess how the scheme is delivered and its impact on local authorities, social workers, and support services.



Early Insights and Policy Implications

With over 97% of eligible care leavers enrolling, the high uptake highlights the demand for financial security among this vulnerable group. Early findings suggest that the scheme is reducing financial stress, allowing young people to pursue education, secure stable housing, and improve well-being. However, some professionals have raised concerns about potential risks for vulnerable individuals, highlighting the need for ongoing support alongside financial assistance.

The evaluation will continue until 2027, with annual reports providing insights to inform future social policies in Wales and beyond. Given the significant international interest in basic income models, CASCADE's findings are expected to shape discussions on welfare reform, youth support, and social equity worldwide.





Seeing the Unseen: Using Psychological Surveys to Understand Autism in Children in Care

Previous research tells us that children in care are more likely to be neurodivergent compared to non-care experienced children. It is also thought there may be substantial challenges for children in care to receive an appropriate diagnosis to enable them to receive the appropriate support throughout their childhood. Specifically, it may be more challenging for an autistic child to receive the correct diagnosis due to potential overlaps and only subtle differences between attachment disorder and autism.

This project, led by Sarah Thompson and in collaboration with the Wales Autism Research Centre in the School of Psychology, aims to understand more about the experiences of autistic children in care in Wales. The project comprises of data analysis from the SAIL databank, a national survey distributed to foster carers, and qualitative interviews with social work staff and carers to enable an increased understanding of the diagnosis and support needs of these young people.

The national survey of foster carers provided an opportunity to understand more about children in care, beyond just their clinical diagnoses. The use of standardised psychological questionnaire methods enabled us to understand more

about the levels of autistic traits, attachment difficulties, and wider strengths and difficulties for children currently in care.

The survey was distributed via The Fostering Network and received responses from 190 foster carers, with information on 222 children in care at that time in Wales. Crucially, this survey was able to give a more complete picture of the levels of autistic traits for children in care than has previously been understood, due to use of these psychological measures not usually used in social care research. Early findings show that a large number of children in care display high levels of autistic traits, whilst not having an autism diagnosis. This suggests that there may be a large number of children in care who could benefit from further assessment and access to diagnosis and support services which may currently be challenging for them to access.



Collaboration: Working Together for Better Social Care

Special Guardianship Order Research

The Special Guardianship Order (SGO) Research project (Special guardianship families in Wales: Experiences and support needs (Nuffield Foundation) – CASCADE) is a multidisciplinary collaboration comprising the Neurodevelopment Assessment Unit (NDAU) at the Cardiff University Centre for Human Developmental Science (CUCHDS; School of Psychology), The Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre (CASCADE) and the Secure Anonymised Information Linkage (SAIL) Databank.

The project aims to investigate the needs and experiences of families with an SGO. The study began in 2024 and will run until March 2026, and is funded by the Nuffield foundation.

An SGO recognises that a child is living long term with an alternative carer, and this carer has parental responsibility for the child. A special guardian could be a grandparent, close relative, family friend or former foster carer. Once a child has an SGO, they are no longer classed as 'looked after' and therefore the support that they receive changes. The Welsh Government has affirmed their commitment to developing an improved and consistent needs-based approach to supporting Special Guardianship families across Wales. There is a lack of evidence base regarding characteristics, circumstances, and needs of these families. We are hoping to bridge this gap and learn more about the experiences and needs of SGO families.

One strand of the study, led by Dr. Paine in the School of Psychology and Co-Director of the Neurodevelopment Assessment Unit, targets resources from the NDAU to primary-aged children with an SGO.



Following a referral from their primary school, children are invited to the university. During their visit children take part in activities to test their social, emotional, cognitive, and behavioural functioning, whilst their guardian completes a series of questionnaires about the child. An Educational Psychologist translates these results, profiling the child's strengths and needs into a personalised report for the child's teacher including suggested strategies to work with the child.

This research works to impact practice by raising awareness of the needs of children with SGOs in schools. So far, such efforts include delivering webinars hosted by the Social Health Research Network (SHRN) to education professionals, sharing blog posts written on the educational needs of primary school children with an SGO and attending stakeholder conferences and events. We are also collaborating with the Welsh Government and Social Work Teams across South Wales to aid information sharing.

The project has the potential to make a step-change in our understanding of structural, social, and psychological factors that could impact on long-term outcomes for children subject to SGOs.



Wales Adoption Cohort Study: Birth family contact paper

The Wales Adoption Cohort Study is celebrating a decade of research into the experiences of adoptive families. In that time the team, led by Professor Katherine Shelton and Dr Amy Paine, has collected six sets of survey data from parents, complemented by interviews and visits by families to the Neurodevelopment Assessment Unit at Cardiff University. This work has been supported with funding from Welsh Government and The Waterloo Foundation. This has helped us produce findings on the factors that underpin placement success, the support needs of the children and families, and the role of adoption agencies and services in preparing and supporting families through the process of adoption and beyond.

Collaboration is key and the interdisciplinary study, based in the School of Psychology, works with colleagues in CASCADE and external stakeholders to develop work on topics relevant to adoption in Wales. We also work closely with the National Adoption Service Cymru and Welsh Government to discuss research priorities. We are about to commence focus groups with parents to gather their views about further data collection, and to consider how we might start to work with their children as part of the study.

Our recent work includes a paper led by Dr Edward Janes on adopted children's contact with birth parents that was developed with Professor Sally Holland (Assistant Director, CASCADE). Birth parent contact is increasingly recognised as important to a child developing an identity reflective of their life history, and to them developing a positive relationship with the birth family as an adult, if desired. However, contact can be difficult to maintain over time.

Analysis of the survey data found that all contact with the birth parents was by letter, and that contact was planned for a significant proportion of families but never happened. Actual contact also decreased over the eight years. Analysis of the interview data indicated that practical challenges and a lack of support hampered contact, though there were also examples of positive long-term relationships. Collaboration between the adoptive and birth parents but also active involvement of agencies and social workers appeared to be important to these positive outcomes. The paper will inform policy concerning the importance of birth parent contact, and we will discuss with professionals how contact can be maintained. For further information about the study, please contact:

adoption@cardiff.ac.uk

Educational Pathways and Outcomes for Care-Experienced Children

Dr Emily Lowthian, Lecturer in Education at Swansea University, recently shared insights from her collaborative research project: Educational Pathways and Outcomes for Care-Experienced Children. The project was a collaborative effort between Swansea University, Cardiff University, University of Bristol, SAIL Databank, Health and Care Research Wales, and CASCADE VOICES, and explored the educational journeys of care-experienced children using anonymised data from the SAIL Databank to better understand the challenges and opportunities they face.

The project aimed to examine how care experiences impact educational outcomes, particularly identifying risk and protective factors that influence attainment. Specifically, the study sought to:

- Analyse how children's age at entry into care, duration of care, and type of placement affect their academic performance.
- Investigate the links between care experiences and key educational milestones, such as Key Stage 1 (KS1), Key Stage 2 (KS2), and GCSE attainment.
- Identify factors, such as school moves, exclusions, and special educational needs, that contribute to lower educational achievement.
- Provide evidence to inform policy and educational interventions to better support care-experienced children.

The research utilised anonymised, population-scale data from the Secure Anonymised Information Linkage (SAIL) Databank, a trusted research environment. A cohort was created by identifying all children born in Wales between 2000 and 2003, tracking their educational progress up to the end of secondary school.

By linking social care and education records, the study examined patterns of care placement, school performance, and

and related factors such as health, socioeconomic background, and school exclusions.

Findings from the project included:

- Early adoption was associated with the highest academic attainment, although still lower than the general population.
- Children reunited with birth parents early performed better than expected, suggesting that stable reunifications can support educational success.
- Late-entry care-experienced children and those with multiple placements faced the greatest educational disadvantages, with higher risks of school moves, exclusions, and poor attainment.
- School mobility, special educational needs, and socioeconomic disadvantage were significant risk factors affecting educational achievement.



Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings highlight the need for tailored interventions to support care-experienced children, particularly those who return home early but remain vulnerable to instability and deprivation. Schools and policymakers should recognise the complex nature of care experiences and provide sustained support to improve educational outcomes.

Change: Making a Difference, Informing Policy and Impacting Practice

Tackling Child Criminal Exploitation

Child criminal exploitation (CCE) is a growing concern in Wales and across the UK, with increasing numbers of young people being groomed into dangerous activities such as drug running, gang-related violence, and other forms of exploitation. Recognising the urgent need for practical tools to support professionals, children, and families, CASCADE researcher Dr. Nina Maxwell has led groundbreaking work in this field, helping to shape both frontline practice and national policy.

Developing the CCE Toolkit: A Research-Informed Response

Dr. Maxwell's research has provided crucial insights into how young people become entangled in criminal exploitation and, more importantly, how they can be identified, supported, and protected. Through extensive engagement with social workers, youth justice teams, law enforcement, and young people with lived experience, she led the development of an innovative online toolkit designed to help professionals combat child criminal exploitation more effectively.

The CCE Toolkit includes:

- A Youth Charter co-produced with young people, outlining their rights and expectations from services.
- A Practitioner Toolkit with evidence-based guidance on identifying warning signs, responding to cases, and collaborating across agencies.
- Parent & Carer Resources to help families understand the risks and recognise when their child may be at risk of exploitation.
- The Complex Safeguarding Wales Website, an accessible digital hub providing up-to-date resources, case studies, and best-practice recommendations for tackling CCE.



Research to Policy: Embedding the Toolkit into Welsh Law

The impact of Dr. Maxwell's work extends far beyond research and resource development—her findings have played a critical role in shaping Welsh Government policy. In March 2023, she was invited to provide expert evidence on child criminal exploitation and knife crime to the UK Parliament. This was followed by a formal submission of evidence to the Senedd's Children, Young People and Education Committee's inquiry into child exploitation in early 2024.

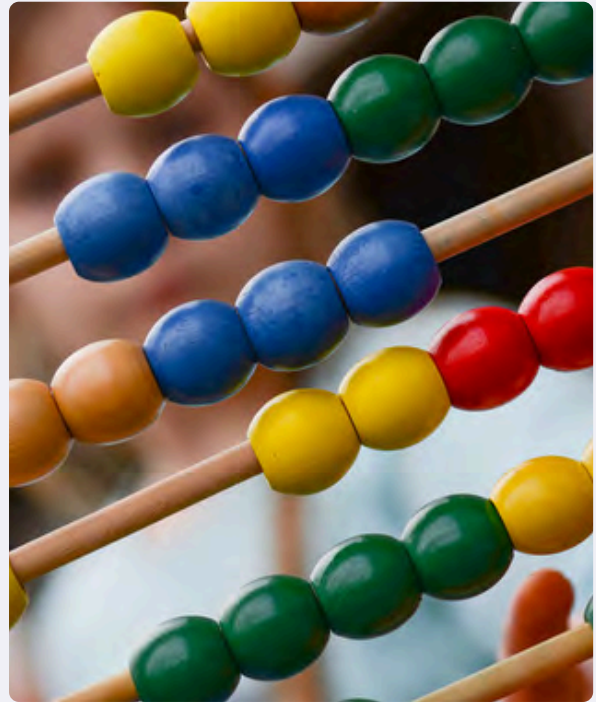
The Senedd inquiry report, published later that year, cited CASCADE's research extensively and recommended that the CCE Toolkit be adopted as national policy. Following this, the Welsh Government formally integrated elements of the toolkit into its approach to tackling youth criminal exploitation, ensuring that local authorities and frontline workers across Wales have access to practical, research-backed tools to protect vulnerable young people.

Social Workers in Schools (SWIS): Learning from England, Reflecting in Wales

This project introduced the findings of the Social Workers in Schools (SWIS) trial to stakeholders in Wales, with the aim of exploring whether a similar intervention could be developed and implemented in a Welsh context.

SWIS was the largest study of its kind ever undertaken in UK children's social care. Conducted across 150 schools in 21 English local authorities, the trial tested the impact of embedding social workers in schools to improve services for families, reduce risks to children, and improve broader outcomes. While the scale and ambition of the trial held strong promise, the final findings showed that SWIS did not significantly improve the outcomes it intended to change.

Rather than advocating for the direct adoption of SWIS in Wales, this project focused on translating the findings for Welsh audiences and fostering meaningful engagement with professionals and policymakers. Key activities included a series of ExChange Wales workshops with practitioners, where participants discussed how a SWIS-style model might operate in Wales, and explored the potential barriers and enablers to implementation. Presentations were delivered to local and national policy audiences, accompanied by a bilingual briefing outlining 10 key messages from the trial.



Although the trial's results did not support the continuation of SWIS in its tested form, this project exemplifies how impactful research engagement does not always involve scaling up an intervention. In this case, the clear evidence from a robust evaluation prompted the UK Government to withdraw funding from the initiative—saving significant investment in a model that does not deliver its intended benefits. For Welsh Government and stakeholders, the project represents a valuable example of how early engagement with research findings can prevent costly implementation of ineffective approaches.





Parenting After Care: A Charter for Change

Louise Roberts' post-doctoral fellowship research (funded by Health and Care Research Wales) explored what happens when young people in and leaving state care become parents. The findings highlighted the propensity for stigma and discrimination, underdeveloped support and concerning levels of family separation.

Since the conclusion of the research, successive impact projects (funded by ESRC IAA and Innovation for All) involving Louise Roberts, Rachael Vaughan and Dawn Mannay and leading third sector organisations in Wales, Voices from Care Cymru, NYAS Cymru and TGP Cymru, have sought to generate policy and practice change. Central to these efforts has been the development of a good practice charter, co-produced with care-experienced parents.

The charter asks signatories to make a series of commitments to support young people before they become parents, when they are expecting and caring for a child, and in the event that concerns are raised about parenting. The charter has been positively received across Wales with all 22 Local Authorities areas having signed up or working towards doing so. The charter and underpinning research have also featured prominently in Welsh Parliament reports from the Petitions Committee and Children, Young People and Education Committee.

The charter has similarly generated interest from countries outside of Wales including England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Australia. Harrow Council in England was the first local authority to sign up and in the accompanying media publicity stated that they would cease the discriminatory practice of automatic pre-birth assessment for parents in and leaving care.

In consultation with local care-experienced parents, the charter has also been adapted to suit local contexts. Islington Council recently published two versions, one outlining the support that they would make available to all care-experienced parents and another dedicated to the support available when safeguarding concerns are raised. National organisations including Barnardo's, The Fostering Network, Voices of Young People in Care (Northern Ireland) and The Why Not Trust (Scotland) are similarly using and promoting the charter within their work. Most recently, the team have been invited to Australia to share this work with policy makers and practitioners in Victoria.

Capacity: Fostering the Future of Social Care Research

We are committed to developing the next generation of social care researchers. Over the past five years, we have supported PhD students, nurtured early and mid-career researchers, and created opportunities for progression, collaboration, and leadership. By building skills, confidence, and career pathways, we're helping shape a stronger, more sustainable research community for the future.



Jobs
Created

103



Promotions &
Regradings

19



PhDs & Post-Doc
Supported*

60+

*20+ graduated students



Welsh Crucible Awards



Phil Smith



Helen Hodges



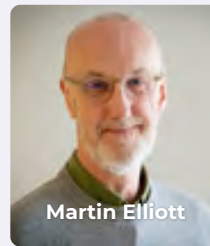
Hannah Bayfield



Verity Bennett



Nina Maxwell



Martin Elliott

British Journal of Social Work BASW Kay McDougall award for article of the year

European Social Work Research Association outstanding contribution from a doctoral thesis



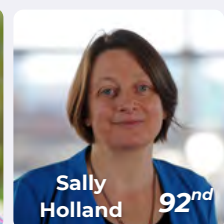
Sophie Wood

NIHR development award

Top 100 Contributors to Social Work Journal Scholarship



Jonathan Scourfield



Sally Holland

CASCADE Partnership Professors since 2020:



Lucy Griffiths



Dawn Mannay



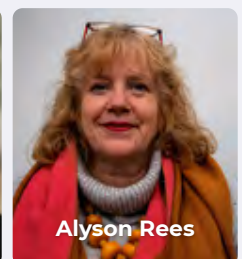
David Wilkins



Katherine Shelton



Clive Diaz



Alyson Rees

Capacity: Fostering the Future of Social Care Research



Health & Care Research Wales Senior Leaders



Jonathan Scourfield



Donald Forrester

Research Development Advisor for the Health & Care Research Wales Faculty



Martin Elliott

Specialist Policy Adviser to Welsh Government



Jonathan Scourfield

Some of our recent completed PhD's

Lorna Stabler - "What are siblings' lived experiences of providing kinship care? Identifying pathways to improving kinship care outcomes."

Rebecca Jones - "Mentoring for children in care: conceptualising the role, value, and outcomes of the Independent Visitor programme."

Lucy Sheehan - "Fixing Change – An Ethnographic Study of Child Protection Practice."

Lucy Treby - "What is the relationship between supervision and practice in child and family social work? An analysis of 12 case studies."

Charlotte Whittaker - "Developing a theory of Motivational Interviewing for statutory child and family social work: How can MI be used to support effective conversations about risk?"

Angela Endicott - "Exploring child welfare practice with parents who use substances from an epistemic injustice perspective."

Ed Janes - "Caring Lives: What do young people who care for family members need to thrive? An empirical investigation."

Health & Care Research Wales Advancing Researcher Awards



Verity Bennett



Sarah Thompson

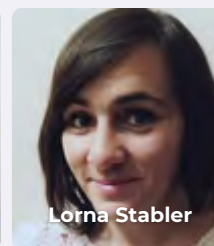


David Westlake

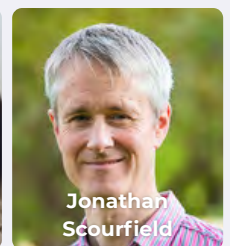
Speciality Leaders for social care for Health & Care Research Wales



Nina Maxwell



Lorna Stabler



Jonathan Scourfield

Health & Care Research Wales Fellowships



Sarah Thompson



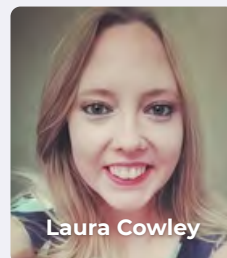
Nell Warner



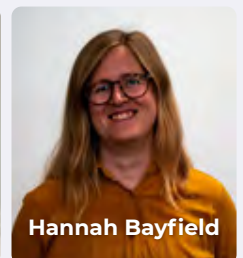
Helen Hodges



Phil Smith



Laura Cowley



Hannah Bayfield

5. Public Involvement, Engagement and Dissemination

Meaningful engagement is central to effective research. We believe that research has the greatest impact when it is shaped by those with lived experience, shared with the people it is intended to support, and communicated in ways that are clear, accessible, and relevant.

Over the past five years, we've built strong networks, platforms, and partnerships to ensure that our work informs practice, influences policy, reflects the voice of those with lived experience and responds to real-world needs. Whether through public involvement, professional engagement, or wider communication, engagement is how we turn research into change.



Public Involvement: Amplifying Lived Experience in Research

Public Involvement is at the heart of our research, ensuring that the voices of those with lived experience shape our studies, policies, and impact. Over the past five years, we have deepened our commitment to researching with care-experienced young people, parents, and carers, strengthening the relevance and reach of our work.

Our CASCADE Voices Care Experienced young people's research advisory group run in partnership with Voices From Care Cymru has been at the core of our Involvement work since CASCADE's inception. The group has continued to flourish over the last 5 years with extra opportunities for group members to get involved as Peer Researchers and even a trip to Edinburgh to share and showcase their work.

The key elements of growth in our Public Involvement over the last 5 years are our Involvement board and our CASCADE Parents group. At the start of the new funding we set about setting up a Public Involvement Board, made of up a range of individuals with lived experience across children's social care (care experienced adults, foster carers and parents). Initially the board's scope was providing advice and guidance to the Public Involvement team to troubleshoot and help set the direction of travel. However as the board's role has embedded, it is now providing centre wide governance and in the near future setting research priorities for CASCADE.

With support from the board, the CASCADE Parent Research advisory group was established. This unique group makes sure the voice of families who have experienced child protection are heard in our centre making sure we're challenging assumptions. Some highlights include being instrumental in shaping our research on Parental Advocacy, developing their own video and enjoying the CASCADE 10 year anniversary.

Public Involvement extends beyond individual projects—our advisory groups, peer researcher roles, and involvement in policy discussions ensure that lived experience is embedded at every level of our work. This commitment has also influenced national conversations, with CASCADE's Public Involvement groups speaking with Senedd committee members and taking part in discussions at Welsh Government.

Public Involvement Participants & Activities



	Participants	Activities
 CASCADE Involvement Board	52	14
 CASCADE Voices	190	40
 CASCADE Parents research advisory group	279	79
 Research Opportunities	540	143





Engagement and Dissemination

ExChange Wales

Over the past five years, ExChange Wales has grown into a thriving national network, linking researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and people with lived experience to share learning and drive change across both children and adult social care.

What began as a shift to online delivery during the pandemic has since evolved into a blended platform for knowledge exchange, offering webinars, blogs, podcasts, creative projects, and themed conference series on topics ranging from adoption and mental health to anti-racist practice and care-experienced parenting.

A key highlight this year was our conference on dementia, which underscored the importance of hearing directly from those living with dementia and their carers. This focus on lived experience added emotional depth and practical insight to the research discussions, helping to shape more empathetic and effective responses across services.

In total, ExChange Wales has engaged tens of thousands of participants, expanded its mailing list, and built a reputation for high-quality, accessible content rooted in real-world relevance. A major achievement was the 'Reframing Adoption' series, which combined expert lectures with creative contributions from adopted children and young people, inspiring further national engagement and helping elevate research to new audiences.

With the creation of new research centres like CARE and SCALE, ExChange Wales has also become a key dissemination platform for emerging research across the social care lifespan. Through partnerships, advisory groups, and sector engagement, it continues to translate complex evidence into practice-ready insights—while ensuring that voices from across Wales and beyond are heard, valued, and connected.



"ExChange is an extremely valuable and reliable source of social care Wales focused information, not available elsewhere. In addition, their work is publicly available both in written reports and webinars/seminars, etc. The work is evidenced with the voice of service users. The end products are of value to practitioners and managers."

Alun, Fosterline

Media Totals



Website views

235,279

Total followers

3,349

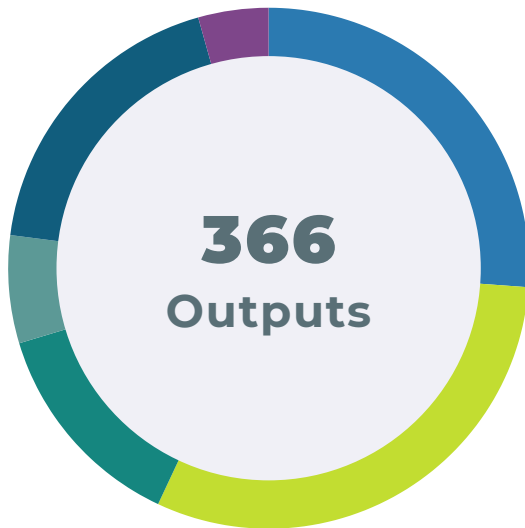
Media views

48,469

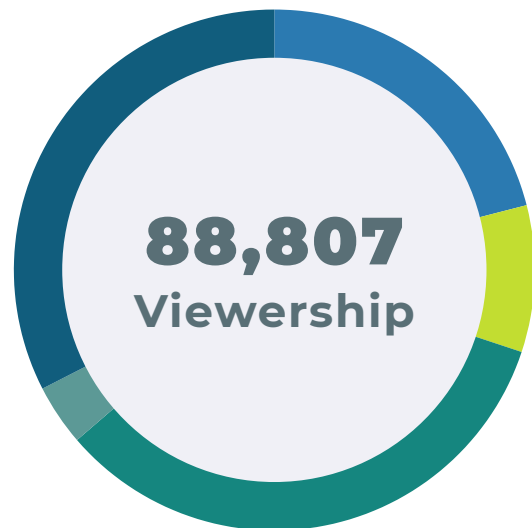
ExChange network

1,827

Media outputs



Media Viewership



	Outputs	Viewership
 Webinar:	90	18,644
 Blogs:	106	8,083
 Videos:	46	29,825
 Bulletins:	86	28,883
 Podcasts:	23	3,372
 Exhibitions:	15	n/a



6. Conclusion

The end of five years of funding provides an opportunity to reflect on the work we have done. As set out in this report, there is much to celebrate. Our success has been achieved through the hard work and dedication of a large number of people – across the Partnership and beyond. This includes researchers, those who fund our work, the professionals, parents and children who have kindly agreed to take part in studies and the many others who have supported the CASCADE Partnership. Thank you to you all.

Turning to the future, the prospects are exciting. We look forward to working closely with the networks of other Centres and organisations we are developing, such as CARE, SCALE and ExChange Wales, and we hope that in the next five years we will continue our policy of “networked growth”, ensuring that while the Partnership thrives it can increase its influence best by helping to create new organisations who we can work closely with. The merit of this can be seen in the way that CARE and SCALE are already growing our academic workforce by interesting new groups of academics in researching social care research in Wales. This bodes well for the work we will be able to do together in the future.

Another area of development in the future is that our work is becoming increasingly international. Not only are we helping set up new Centres abroad, such as the Better Childhoods Centre, but we are delivering training in research methods in Italy, China and Denmark this year. This reflects the rapidly increasing profile of our work and our recognition as a centre of excellence – and it also provides opportunities for us to learn from other countries and cultures, as well as accessing different forms of funding.

We are also increasingly being recognised for our methodological excellence. The next five years will see us sharing and developing more methodological innovations. So the CASCADE Partnership should remain an intellectually exciting place to work.

All this effort and activity is aimed at one goal: to improve services and experiences for children and their families. There is a tendency for the academic world to talk about the “impact” of our work. Yet impact suggests the relationship goes in one direction (and also implies that being on the receiving end might be quite unpleasant!). I prefer to think of the CASCADE Partnership as having influence. We provide ideas and evidence to inform the development of policy and practice in relation to children’s social care.

Influence takes longer to develop than “impact”. It requires dialogue and sustained relationships, and has to be based on a deep understanding of the sector. Ten years into CASCADE and after our first five years of infrastructure funding we feel that the CASCADE Partnership is making a useful contribution to national and international debate about the purposes of children’s social care and how best to deliver excellent services. We hope and believe that such influence is likely to make a positive difference for children and families. Working to ensure that we have a positive influence on children’s social care through excellent research remains our primary focus over the next five years. I look forward to sharing more on that in future Reports.

Donald Forrester

Director of CASCADE Partnership