



Exploring the Role of Personal Advisors in Wales: A Co-Produced Study with Care Experienced Young People

Dr Phil Smith, Samantha Fitz-Symonds,

Dr Louise Roberts

March 2026



CASCADE Infrastructure Partnership



The CASCADE Partnership is funded by Health and Care Research Wales. Our aim is to produce and share outstanding research that improves policy and practice in children's social care. The partnership brings together the CASCADE Centre for Children's Social Care Research and Development, the Centre for Trials Research and the Centre for Human Developmental Science from Cardiff University and the Secure Anonymised Information Linkage databank at Swansea University. Together we seek to combine world class methodological expertise, strong partnerships with those who use and deliver services and in-depth understanding of the sector to create research that improves the lives of children and families.

Contents

1. Introduction and Purpose of the Interim Report	3
2. Policy and Practice Context	4
3. Study Aims, Objectives and Design.....	5
4. Work Package One: ‘Magic Moments’ Workshops and Evidence Review.....	6
5. Integration of Findings and Next Steps	14
6. References	15

1. Introduction and Purpose of the Interim Report

Exploring the Role of Personal Advisors in Wales: A Co-Produced Study with Care Experienced Young People

This interim report summarises the plan for the study and the work undertaken to date. This includes the recruitment of peer researchers, co-production training, a realist review, and collecting data from personal advisors as part of two participatory workshops. The report describes the research methods used in year one, and the subsequent findings from this work. These findings, along with findings from year two of the project, will help us to generate good practice guidelines relevant to care leaving teams across Wales, with contributions from young people and personal advisor teams.



2. Policy and Practice Context

Personal advisors (PAs) are a key source of support to young people leaving the care system, and the role is formally recognised within the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014. The Act places responsibilities on local authorities to ensure that care leavers receive advice, guidance and practical support as they move towards greater independence and adulthood. Although a PA does not require a specific professional or occupational qualification, the responsibilities are broad. The work includes covering advice and support on matters such as finances, education, and employment, whilst PAs also play a central role in developing, reviewing and implementing pathway plans for care leavers.

Young people begin the transition towards increased independence and adulthood earlier than their peers and this period can be particularly challenging, especially when young people have a limited support network in their lives (Glynn, 2021). With increased risks of loneliness and isolation, poor mental health, homelessness and criminal exploitation, the quality of support received during this time, such as that from PAs, is a critical determinant of future wellbeing (Greeno et al., 2023).

Despite the recognised importance of the PA role in supporting care leavers, there remains limited research in this area and practice is not well understood. For instance, little is known about how the role is experienced, or what the enablers and barriers are to good practice. Concerns about the variable levels of support provided to young people, as well as problems with recruitment and workload capacity, have been noted (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2019).

3. Study Aims, Objectives and Design

This study aims to investigate the PA sector in Wales to provide a detailed understanding of the PA role, through a co-produced piece of research with care leavers. It intends to inform future practice in relation to supporting the transition out of care for young people, on their pathways towards greater independence and adulthood. The three overarching objectives are:

- I. To explore the perceptions and experiences of care leavers and the practices of key stakeholders, including PAs, their team managers and senior managers, and the primary carers of young people, such as foster parents.
- II. To develop an understanding of the enablers and barriers to good PA practice
- III. To understand and assess the implementation and benefits of co-produced research with care leavers, to help inform future co-produced research of this nature.

To help answer these three objectives, the study has been split into three main work packages (WPs).

- WP1: Magic moments workshops with PAs from across Wales and an evidence review.
- WP2: In-depth exploration of good practice and priorities for the PA role. This phase will involve working with approximately 3 local authorities and will involve young people, PAs and foster carers.
- WP3: Evaluation of the coproduction approach

4. Work Package One: ‘Magic Moments’ Workshops and Evidence Review

‘Magic Moments’ Workshops

Two workshops carried out with PAs in north Wales and south Wales (n=39) enabled the experiences and perceptions of good practice to be explored and understood, by focusing on positive stories. The ‘Magic Moments’ approach is based on Experience Based Co-Design (Bate & Robert, 2007), which provides a learning opportunity informed by people’s experiential journeys, in this case, of practice. The method was identified through the Developing Evidence Enriched Practice (DEEP) Handbook (Andrews et al., 2023), a practical resource, guide and approach to support participatory action research.

In these workshops time was given to think about examples of practice that go well, or which result in positive outcomes for care leavers. By allowing time for these stories to be gathered, explored and responded to as part of a group, the process supports service evaluation, learning and development to take place.

The plan for the workshops is outlined below.

Stage 1: Groups of PAs discuss what positive practice means to them. Time is then given to consider examples of positive practice, or ‘Magic Moments’ from their own practice. Stories are collected from participants via a ‘magic moments’ form which asks everyone *‘to think of a time when something really made a difference.’* A series of questions help participants to reflect and jot down their thoughts. These include:

1. **Describe the moment.** What happened? Who was involved?
2. **What made it a magic moment?** Why does it stand out to you?
3. **What made it possible?** Think about the people, actions, attitudes, systems, or values.
4. **What strengths were in play?** In the young person, in you, your organisation?
5. **What does this tell you?** What works well for supporting care leavers?

Stage 2: Exploratory Talk Circles then take place within each group, facilitated by members of the research team. In each circle, facilitators ask volunteers to read out each story. Once read, the participants are invited to stand next to the one story that is most ‘magic’ to them. Participants are then invited to explain their decision – “what struck you most about the story?” If any of the stories are not selected the group are invited to consider why these might be less magic when compared with others.

Stage 3: The small groups then return to one larger group, where the most significant stories from each group are shared, for further reflections and common themes to be considered. The group thinks about how well the chosen stories reflect and represent what PA practice means to them, and how more of these positive examples of practice might be enabled in their future practice.

‘Magic Moments’ Findings

In total, 39 PAs attended the ‘Magic Moments’ workshops in north and south Wales. All the written PA stories were collated into a table to help identify themes within each of the five questions that were asked. The most commonly recurring themes across the five questions are provided in the table below:

Question	Key themes across the stories
1. Describe the moment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Moments when PAs realised that they were valued, trusted or a friend to young people (being hugged, or referred to as a member of the family) - When young people overcame the odds – improving self-confidence; leaving the house; getting a job, going to university - When a safe home had been gained - Establishing social networks with family, friends and loved ones - Young people having a family of their own - Young people beginning to take control of their own lives
2. What made it a ‘magic moment’?	<p>There was some overlap across the first two questions. In addition to the points described in the first question, other themes included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A feeling that PAs were making a difference - When young people shared personal celebrations with PAs (highlighted that a strong, positive relationship existed between the PA and young person) - PAs overcoming the odds (with helping to secure accommodation for young people; reconnecting young people with their family; to develop a relationship with a young person; advocating on a young person’s behalf) - Simply spending social time with a young person
3. What made it possible?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The strength of young people, to overcome the odds and commit to their goals - A consistent, reliable, long-term relationship with one PA - A trusting, mutually respectful and positive relationship - A PA who listens to and acts on the wishes of young people - Displaying confidence and having belief and a positive view of a young person and their future - Having support and flexibility from a team manager and the wider service - Being a good communicator and advocating for young people - A good knowledge of local services and opportunities - Multi-agency working

<p>4. What strengths were in play?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A stable long-term PA team, which enables meaningful relationships to develop; support and advice from colleagues - PAs demonstrating how they value young people - Being a good and active listener - Being determined, patient and creative, to overcome obstacles (PAs and young people) - Wider social networks of support
<p>5. What it tells you about what works for supporting care leavers?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To be kind - To encourage - Consistency - Share in achievements and day-to-day lives - Practice that is non-judgmental - A wider network of support (for PAs and young people) - Recognise impact and achievement no matter how small (important for morale and self-confidence – for PAs and young people) - Good knowledge – of young people’s needs and how to support them; of local services and opportunities for engagement; of how systems and processes work (housing, finances, education, benefits)

All the participants were also recorded narrating their individual ‘Magic Moments’ stories and these were then transcribed and uploaded to NVivo, a computer package which supports data analysis. We used a previously applied typology (Paulsen and Berg, 2016) to help make sense of the descriptions of PA practices from the ‘Magic Moments’ workshops. This typology was informed by the views of young people leaving care and included four main themes, viewed as important for leaving care practices and outcomes. The four themes include:

1. Practical support – economic guidance, financial support, housing and other “practicalities” in everyday life
2. Emotional support – having someone who loves you and cares for you...is always there if you need them
3. Affirmational guidance support – opportunity to receive guidance, advice and feedback...to self-evaluate and make well-considered choices
4. Participation support – opportunity to make own decisions, having control over their own lives and the need to be independent

(Paulsen and Berg, 2016).

Across the 39 stories collected through the ‘Magic Moments’ workshops there were many examples of both practical and emotional support, which PAs identified as important parts of practice to them.

Practical and Emotional Support

Practical support included help with securing housing, preparing for volunteering or work opportunities, including support with applications and interview processes, and day to day activities more generally:

“Young people were moved to a homeless hostel at 16 years of age...The PA supported them to get a flat; supporting them into employment.”

“My young person wanted to volunteer. They had never had a job and not been in education since the age of 16. We looked into this and found a local place, completed an application. We practiced interviews...”

“Supported a young person leaving prison, requiring access to housing support...obtaining accommodation enabled the young person to take control of their life again.”

All the PAs recognised that offering emotional support was crucial to their role, to help young people grow and develop, but also to help establish the initial relationship between the young person and PA. This emotional support was described through an approach which was consistent and reliable, which led to trust emerging in the relationship:

“...the consistency part of it is that he’s always been able to connect with me, he’s always been able to pick up the phone if anything stresses him out, he feels that he can open up to me and I can calm him down and he can actually think clearly and knows what he needs to do next to be able to deal with things.”

“...and that magic moment, is that...with the right support...that consistency...in his life that he knows he can talk to and open up and be his true self without being judged or me going ‘I’m putting the phone down cause you’re talking negatively’ or whatever. You know letting him have that time to offload and chatting and getting him back into, into thinking clearly... I think that that’s the magic moment...”

This emotional support consisted of being there no matter what and following through on promises made. These acts alone could highlight to a young person how much a PA cared about them and helped to build trust. Emotional support was also achieved through the language that the PAs used, which was positive, acknowledging the achievements that young people made:

“They thrive off praise...Having someone who will listen to them and aim[ing] for small wins helped them overcome their challenges. Making sure that we remembered the discussions and understanding what I said I would do (following through on promises, to build trust). This then helped the relationship to grow. The positive relationship they had with the PA helped the young person to believe that they could have a positive life. PAs should never give up and [should] always keep going.”

“I’m so proud of you...that little word can mean so much for them...yeah, a really positive statement.”

Affirmational guidance support

Although they were less frequent when compared to practical and emotional support, there were some examples of affirmational guidance support in the narratives:

“...she made the decision to leave that council property and go into private renting and I said look, I would advise against it but it’s your choice and she rings me like once a year now. Just like checking in...and she’s done really well and she’s working and a successful mum.”

“...he feels that he can open up to me and I can calm him down and he can actually think clearly and knows what he needs to do next to be able to deal with things. Because I’m not doing anything on his behalf, because he needs to be able to do it. So, talking through what he wanted to do and then making a decision...”

PAs understood that young people needed to take control of their own lives as part of the leaving care process. This included being able to make their own choices and decisions, which could be informed through guidance from their PAs. Crucially, PAs recognised that the young people needed the space to make their own decisions, and that PAs needed to be supportive and non-judgemental of those decisions, even if they didn’t agree with them.

Participation support

When it came to participation support, PAs recognised the importance of truly listening to young people and showing that what they have to say matters, by supporting them in decision-making processes:

“Young people...need time and patience, and someone to actively listen. We need to work with young people, to make sure they are heard and involved in decision-making, set reasonable targets and recognise the steps forward, no matter how small.”

“the ability of the young person to feel that he’s able to speak openly and to just express his wishes and like throughout his pathway plan...I just think that’s so important, really including the young person in the plan and sort of really hearing what he has to say and where he sees himself in the next six months so you can just put those achievable steps in place to support him in reaching that goal.”

System support

Through our inductive analysis of the data, beyond the typology described above, we also developed several themes, including system support and advocacy for young people. In relation to system support, PAs viewed this as a crucial factor in enabling them to carry out their work in a meaningful way. This included having supportive colleagues and team managers and a degree of flexibility when it came to processes:

“...my persistence of going up there really frequently but also my managers allowing me to go up there that often...it takes up quite a lot of time and they allowed me to...really focus on this young person...My team really supported me with that by maybe doing some of my statutory stuff with other people so I had more space to work with this particular young person.”

Further exploration of the typology described above will take place during the second round of data collection, as part of WP2. WP2 will also include gaining the viewpoints from care leavers and foster carers, about the practices and priorities of PAs. This will provide an opportunity to compare how PAs, young people and foster carers understand the PA role, and what they view as the key priorities.

Evidence Review

Alongside the ‘Magic Moments’ workshops, a rapid realist review (RRR) of the literature was undertaken to develop an initial explanatory understanding of how and why Personal Advisor (PA) practices support care leavers, and under what circumstances these practices are effective.

A realist approach was selected because of its focus on explaining complex social interventions by identifying the relationships between contexts, mechanisms and outcomes (CMO configurations) (Pawson & Tilley, 1997; Pawson, 2013). This approach is particularly well-suited to the PA role, which is delivered within varied organisational contexts and relies heavily on relational and discretionary practice, rather than standardised interventions.

Review Process

The review involved the following stages:

- Identification and screening of relevant literature relating to leaving care support, Personal Advisor roles and equivalent professional practices.

Extraction of data relating to:

- Core components of practice (what PAs do)
- Contexts (barriers and enablers shaping practice)
- Mechanisms (how and why practices produce effects)
- Outcomes for care leavers
- Organisation of extracted data into Component-Mechanism-Context-Outcome (CMO) tables.
- Initial development of early CMO configurations to identify recurring explanatory patterns across studies.

At this stage, the review has produced a structured evidence base including a set of 15 included papers, an evidence extraction spreadsheet and early CMO configurations. Further synthesis and programme theory refinement will take place in the upcoming stages of the project.

Early Findings from the Review

The review highlights several recurrent mechanisms through which PA practices appear to support care leavers, alongside the contextual conditions that enable or constrain these mechanisms.

1. *Relational Continuity and Consistent Contact*

A consistent finding across the literature is the importance of regular, proactive and sustained contact between PAs and care leavers. This continuity operates as a foundational enabling condition for effective support.

- Mechanism: Regular contact communicates availability, reliability, and genuine interest, which builds trust and reduces feelings of abandonment
- Outcomes: Care leavers are more likely to feel supported, remain engaged with services, seek help during periods of difficulty, and navigate transitions more successfully
- Contexts: This mechanism is strengthened where PAs have manageable caseloads, sufficient time, and organisational flexibility, and weakened where high workloads, staff turnover, or rigid service thresholds limit relational continuity

2. *Trust-Based Relational Practice and 'Safe Uncertainty'*

The literature also highlights the importance of PAs being able to engage in relationally flexible practice, including taking appropriate relational risks and working within what has been described as “safe uncertainty.”

- Mechanism: When PAs can show authentic warmth, acknowledge uncertainty, and adapt their professional positioning, relationships become more human, reciprocal, and emotionally safe
- Outcomes: These conditions support trust, co-learning, openness, and help-seeking by care leavers
- Contexts: Supportive management, professional autonomy, and organisational cultures that value relational work enable this mechanism, while risk-averse systems and overly proceduralised practice constrain it

3. *Advocacy and System Navigation*

Another consistent mechanism identified is the role of PAs as advocates and system navigators on behalf of care leavers.

- Mechanism: PAs use their institutional knowledge, authority, and persistence to negotiate access to services, challenge rigid thresholds, and bridge gaps between fragmented systems
- Outcomes: Care leavers experience improved access to housing, education, financial support, and other services, and reduced system-related stress
- Contexts: This mechanism is most effective where PAs have strong knowledge of local systems, supportive multi-agency relationships, and discretion to act flexibly

4. *Learning Together and Participation*

The review also identifies the value of learning together, where PAs position themselves as partners rather than experts.

- Mechanism: Acknowledging uncertainty and learning alongside young people reduces power imbalances and increases psychological safety
- Outcomes: Care leavers are more likely to engage with complex processes and persist rather than disengage when systems feel overwhelming
- Contexts: Time, continuity, and relational stability enable this approach; high caseloads and performance-driven environments limit it



5. Integration of Findings and Next Steps

Integration of Findings

There is a strong alignment between the early realist review findings and the themes emerging from the 'Magic Moments' workshops. Both sources emphasise:

- The centrality of supportive relationships to effective PA practice
- The importance of consistency, trust, and time
- The role of PAs in advocacy and navigating complex systems
- The value of kindness, encouragement, and non-judgmental practice

While the 'Magic Moments' workshops foregrounded lived professional experiences of what works well in practice, the realist review provides an emerging explanatory framework that helps to articulate why these practices matter and how they generate positive outcomes for care leavers.

Further synthesis of the realist review will be undertaken in the next phase of the project, including refinement of CMO configurations and development of an initial programme theory. These findings will be tested and extended through data collected in WP2 with care leavers and foster carers and subsequently integrated with practitioner perspectives to inform final conclusions and practice recommendations.

Next Steps

Informed by these early findings we are now beginning to prepare for WP2 with our peer researchers, and the in-depth exploration of good practice and priorities for the PA role, across three local authorities in Wales. The proposed timeline for the remainder of the study is set out below.

Timeline – 2026/2027

- Apr 2026: WP2 data collection begins
- Jun 2026: WP2 data analysis begins
- Sep 2026: Early WP2 findings shared with advisory panel
- Oct 2026: Stakeholder event planning
- Nov 2026: WP2 findings written up
- Dec 2026: Event planning completed
- Jan 2027: Stakeholder events to co-create practice guidance
- Feb 2027: Final report written up; co-produce future research application

6. References

Bate, P., and Robert, G. (2007). Toward more user-centric OD: lessons from the field of experience-based design and a case study. *The Journal of Applied Behavioural Science*, 43(1), 41-66.

Care Inspectorate Wales. (2019). National Overview Report in relation to care experienced children and young people. Online. Available at: [National Overview Report in relation to care experienced children and young people](#) . Accessed. 15.10.25

Andrews, N., et al. (2023). *Developing Evidence Enriched Practice: Handbook*. Online. Available at: [DEEP-Handbook.pdf](#). Accessed. 23.04.2025.

Glynn, N. (2021). Understanding care leavers as youth in society: A theoretical framework for studying the transition out of care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 1221, 1-12.

Greeno, E.J., Gould-Kabler., Bowman, S., Strubler, K., and Harburger, D. (2023). Enhanced-youth transition planning: An innovative practice change with transition-age youth involved with child welfare in a rural setting. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 149, 1-10.

Paulsen, V., and Berg, B. (2016). Social support and interdependency in transition to adulthood from child welfare services. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 68, 125-131.

Pawson, R., & Tilley, N. (1997). *Realistic Evaluation*. Sage Publications.

Pawson, R. (2013). *The Science of Evaluation: A Realist Manifesto*. Sage Publications.



CASCADE

Authors and Contributors

Phil Smith, Samantha Fitz-Symonds, Louise Roberts, Elizabeth Payne, Emily Baker

Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre (CASCADE), Cardiff University, School of Social Sciences (SOCSI), Cardiff University

For further information please contact:

CASCADE: Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre

Cardiff University
3 Museum Place
Cardiff
CF10 3RL

CASCADE@cardiff.ac.uk