CASCADE Partnership



Ymchwil Iechyd a Gofal Cymru
Health and Care Research Wales

Ariennir gan Lywodraeth Cymru
Funded by Welsh Government

2025 - 2026
Annual report



CASCADE Infrastructure Partners

CASCADE

ExChange

SAIL DATABANK

Cardiff University / Prifysgol Caerdydd — Centre for Trials Research / Canolfan Ymchwil Treialon

Cardiff University / Prifysgol Caerdydd — School of Psychology / Ysgol Seicoleg

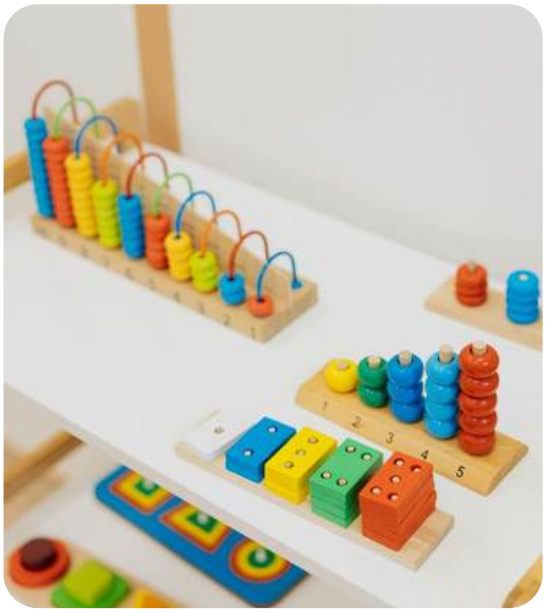
Cardiff University / Prifysgol Caerdydd — School of Social Sciences / Ysgol y Gwyddorau Cymdeithasol

Ymchwil Iechyd a Gofal Cymru
Health and Care Research Wales

Llywodraeth Cymru
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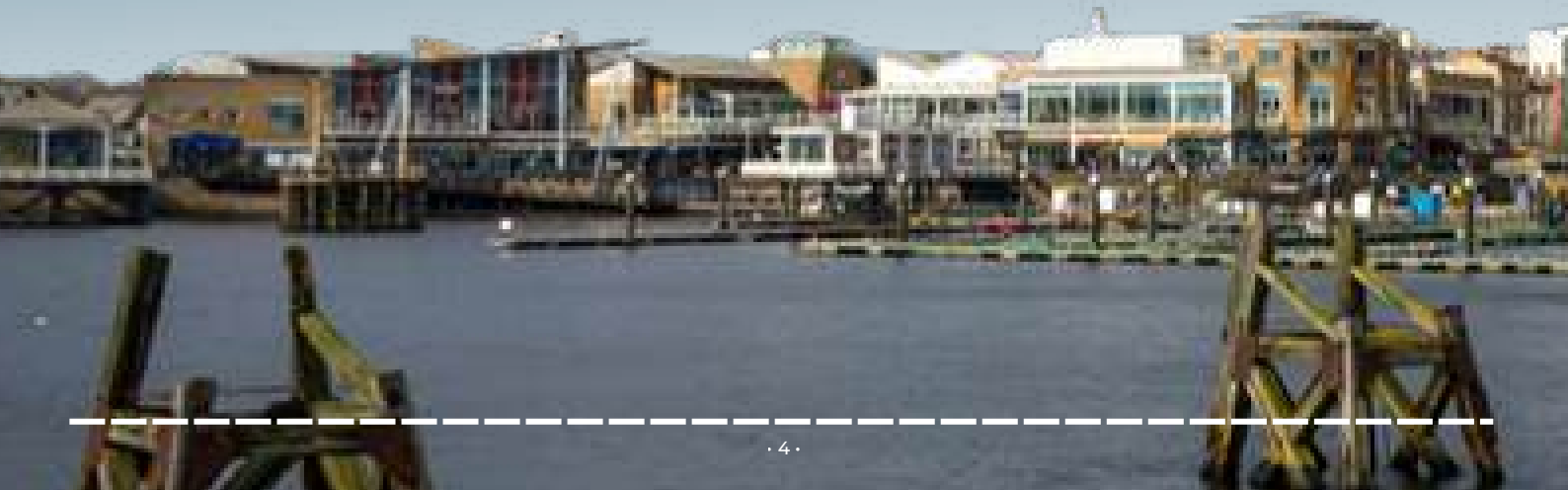
1. Director's Overview

It is a pleasure and a privilege to provide an introduction to our Annual Report. As Director, I am already aware of the hard work and amazing achievements that characterise our Partnership, but seeing them brought together in one place is an opportunity to marvel at the exciting and important things my colleagues have been doing over the last 12 months.

At our Awayday last year we tried to capture what CASCADE is all about, and agreed on three Cs: to Cultivate, Collaborate and Change. This means we develop capacity by Cultivating individuals and organisations. We Collaborate across and beyond the Partnership because collaborating allows us to do excellent research and achieve change. And Change is the core purpose of the CASCADE Partnership. We are an applied Centre and our aim is to make the world a better place, to improve children's social care.

Throughout this Report you will see examples of the three Cs – from establishing exciting new Centres to influencing government policies; from individual promotions to contributions to whole system changes. I think – in my biased opinion – it is an inspiring read.

This is all possible because of the exceptional team work that characterises the work of the Partnership. We bring together a combination of sector knowledge and methodological expertise that allows us to do excellent research. Throughout our work we seek to place the voices of those with lived experience at the heart of what we do. We run substantial programmes of sector engagement activities, in partnership with the ExChange network. We also have a small but excellent team to support bid writing and project management.



These resources are made possible through the consistent support and funding, from Welsh Government, through Health and Care Research Wales. Our Infrastructure funding has allowed us to build a Centre with an international profile that aims to improve children's social care here in Wales. It has also enabled us to build a family of sister Centres that is unlike anything else I am aware of. I hope you enjoy reading about the work we have been doing.

Donald Forrester
Director of CASCADE Partnership



Professor Andy Pithouse was awarded an MBE for services to social care education and policy, recognising a career that has had a lasting influence on social care research, policy and practice in Wales and beyond. Andy has been a longstanding supporter of the centre, including contributing as co-investigator on one of CASCADE's early studies evaluating the Frontline pilot and supporting staff. His influential research on social work as an 'invisible trade' continues to shape the field today, while his later work with Welsh Government helped inform major social care legislation in Wales.



2. Who's Who, Governance, Partnerships

The Partnership brings together four research centres: CASCADE, CTR, SAIL and Cardiff University's School of Psychology 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.



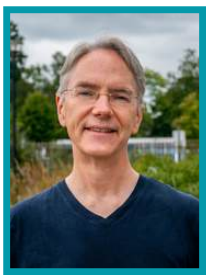
Mike Robling is Professor and Director of Population Health Trials at the Centre for Trials Research. He leads the contribution of the CTR and has a key role developing complex and innovative evaluative methods for CSC.



Martin Elliott is Senior Research Fellow and Strategic Academic Lead for Equalities Work, supporting research exploring inequality, social justice and equitable outcomes across children's social care.



Louise Roberts is Strategic Academic Lead for Public Involvement, leading CASCADE's work to ensure lived experience remains central to research design, delivery and impact.



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



Lucy Griffiths is Professor at Swansea University and ADR Wales Co-Director, leading academic research focused on child health and the social, environmental and wider factors affecting the wellbeing of children and young people.



Nina Maxwell is Principal Research Fellow and Strategic Academic Lead for Criminal and Sexual Exploitation Research, leading work focused on safeguarding, child exploitation and transitional safeguarding practice.



David Westlake is Principal Research Fellow and Strategic Academic Lead for Evaluative Studies, leading large-scale evaluations focused on improving outcomes for children, young people and families.



Dawn Mannay is Strategic Academic Lead for Postgraduate Research, supporting the development of postgraduate researchers and strengthening creative and qualitative research capacity across CASCADE.



Katherine Shelton is Professor of Developmental Psychology at Cardiff University, leading research focused on children's mental health, family relationships and the experiences of care-experienced, adopted and vulnerable children and young people.

3. Summary of the year

The past year has marked the beginning of a new phase for the CASCADE Partnership as we move into our first year of sustainability funding from Health and Care Research Wales.

This transition has provided an opportunity to reflect on our focus as a research centre, refine our research strategy, and consider where we can make the greatest contribution to children's social care research, policy and practice in Wales and beyond.

Throughout 2025–2026, CASCADE Partnership researchers continued to secure new funding, publish influential research, strengthen partnerships and engage with policymakers, practitioners and communities across Wales and internationally.

The following pages highlight some of the key achievements, outputs and areas of impact from across the Partnership during the reporting year, including core metrics, publication highlights and examples of how CASCADE Partnership research is contributing to meaningful change for children, young people and families.

Core Metrics
Reporting period: 2025/2026

CASCADE Partnership

Health and Care Research Wales infrastructure award to the group

Direct funding awarded **£600k**

Jobs created through direct funding **8** CV

Grants won during reporting period

Grants won	Led by group	Group collaborating
Number	4	2
Value	£444k	£3.5m
Funding to Wales	£414k	£1.8m
Funding to group	£414k	£1.1m
Additional jobs created for Wales	4	18
Additional jobs created for group	4	12

75 Number of publications

86 Number of public engagement events

26 Number of public involvement opportunities

Publication highlights



Experimental Methods and Childrens Social Care the Contributions of Randomised Control Trials

Book edited by CASCADE researcher David Westlake and including nine chapters by CASCADE authors, in recognition of our leading role in children's social care RCTs.

A Cluster randomised controlled trial of social workers in schools in England

Largest ever RCT in UK social work; now published in an international peer-reviewed journal.



Identifying the parental figures of children who enter care: The pros and cons of different data linkage methods using Welsh datasets

A methodological advance which includes consideration of fathers, on whom there has been little attention to date in administrative data research. Led by our data linkage lead Nell Warner and one of the other authors our colleague Helen Hodges who sadly recently passed away.

Adopted children's internalizing symptoms and externalizing problems 8 years post-placement: Developmental trajectories and transitions.

Collaboration with School of Psychology. Publication from Adoption Cohort Study which was CASCADE's first study resulting from this collaboration.

Motivational interviewing training for child and family social workers in Finland: An exploratory evaluation study

An international application of an approach to child protection practice developed from motivational interviewing by CASCADE academics Donald Forrester and David Wilkins.



Educational pathways and outcomes for care-experienced children: A 16-year longitudinal study.

Important new evidence on educational outcomes for care-experienced children that breaks this group down into seven different care profiles. Swansea-Cardiff collaboration



Making accurate judgements in child welfare: comparing ChatGPT with qualified social workers.

Innovative study comparing AI and professional judgements.

Participatory Approaches in Child and Family Social Work

Book on participatory approaches in social work that is edited by CASCADE early career researcher Sammi Fitz-Symonds and features several CASCADE studies from recent years. Six chapters by CASCADE authors.

Innovative and ambitious or unrealistic and risky? Initial professional perspectives on the Basic Income for Care Leavers in Wales pilot.

First peer-reviewed results from this major evaluation.



4. Key themes this year

This year's report is structured around three key themes that reflect the breadth of the CASCADE's Partnership work and the areas that matter most to us as a research centre: Cultivation, Collaboration and Change. Together, these sections highlight how we continue to develop new areas of research and innovation, work alongside partners across policy and practice, influence meaningful change for children and families, and support the growth of future research and sector leadership.

Cultivation -

Highlighting how the CASCADE Partnership continues to grow and develop new areas of research, partnerships and innovation, while supporting people, skills and leadership across the sector to strengthen the future of children's social care research and practice.

Collaboration -

Showcasing the shared working that underpins CASCADE Partnership's research, bringing together researchers, policymakers, practitioners and communities.

Change -

Exploring how CASCADE Partnership's work is influencing policy, practice and real-world outcomes for children, families and services across Wales and beyond.

Cultivation

CASCADE Partnership and networked growth

Over the last few years, the CASCADE Partnership has been a key player in developing new research centres with infrastructure funding from Health and Care Research Wales.





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

The first was the Centre for Adult Social Care Research (CARE). In this case, Health and Care Research Wales had put out a specific call for expressions of interest to set up such a centre, recognising the need for it in the evidence ecology for the Welsh health and social care system. CASCADE Deputy Director Jonathan Scourfield led a bid for Cardiff to host this centre, bringing together expertise from a range of academic disciplines and schools across the university. CARE has gone from strength to strength since starting in 2023, under the leadership of Professor Paul Willis.

SCALE
The Centre for Social Care and Artificial Intelligence Learning

The second was Centre for Social Care and Artificial Intelligence Learning (SCALE). In this case, CASCADE Director Professor Donald Forrester was instrumental in conceiving the idea for such a centre and negotiating collaboration between the Schools of Social Science and Computer Science at Cardiff. SCALE was one of the centres bidding for new Health and Care Research Wales catalytic centre funding, and this was successful. It is only one year old but already has had some early funding success.



ExChange

Thirdly, there is ExChange Wales. This is the organisation focused on presenting insights from research to the social care sector. ExChange was originally part of CASCADE but is now an independent entity in its own right with strong links to both CASCADE, CARE and SCALE.





NCSR

CASCADE researchers have also played an important role in strengthening wider social care research infrastructure across the UK. Jonathan Scourfield was involved in establishing the National Centre for Suicide Prevention and Self-Harm Research (NCSR), based at Swansea University. The centre brings together expertise in population data science, social care and administrative data linkage to strengthen the evidence base for social care policy and practice across the UK.

This networked growth puts Cardiff in the top tier of UK universities in terms of social care research infrastructure funding. It is distinctive in broad social care scope, covering the whole life course, and also the role of AI. The CASCADE Partnership will continue to work with these other centres and ExChange to improve the social care research evidence landscape in Wales.

Cultivating International Research and Learning

The Centre for Better Childhoods (Center for Bedre Børneliv) is a research centre established at the Copenhagen University College. The centre brings together social work, early child education, and health visiting, along with other practice disciplines that work with this group, to try to discover how to improve outcomes for children under the age of seven. Donald Forrester was involved in setting up the Centre for Better Childhoods and advised on research methods appropriate for meeting their aims. Donald remains the Chair of the Scientific Board, reviewing all their projects and visiting Copenhagen annually to support the development of the Centre.

In August 2025, Lorna Stabler, CASCADE Research Fellow, and Donald travelled together to deliver the first research methods summer school offered by the centre. The week of teaching involved sessions on research design, realist methodology, and developing a successful research proposal, and was attended by over 50 participants from across Denmark and Sweden.

Following this summer school, Lorna remained in Denmark with the centre for three months to support the development of realist informed projects, including delivering workshops on realist reviews, realist evaluation andimplementation science. She also delivered lectures to social work students, sharing research conducted by CASCADE.



The on-going collaboration with Copenhagen University College aims to develop future bids. For example, Lorna is currently involved in developing a bid with academics at Copenhagen University College and the University College of Southern Denmark, focused on the key mechanisms within successful edge of care interventions. Two visiting PhD students from the Centre for Better Childhoods will come for a one-month research stay in 2026 - 2027 academic year.





Shaping Kinship Care Research in Wales

Despite increasing research and awareness of kinship care, there was no mechanism for kinship carers to shape research in Wales. To address this, CASCADE worked with AFKA Cymru and Kinship to set up a new group - The Kinship Care Research and Policy Advisory Group.

This group is an important example of how CASCADE is cultivating research capacity in Wales through collaboration between researchers, practitioners, third-sector organisations and people with lived experience. The group enables kinship carers to help shape research priorities, influence policy discussions and strengthen the evidence base around kinship care in Wales.

The group is particularly valuable in an area where major evidence gaps remain, and there is increasing policy focus.

Setting up the group created an on-going structure to group research and policy in lived experience of kinship families. The group meets every three months, and academics and policy makers can consult with the members about potential research ideas, on-going projects or policy initiatives. There have also been opportunities for members to participate in conferences, working groups, and media appearances.



PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT HIGHLIGHT

This group is an example of how we work to always involve people with lived experience in shaping the work we do, and how we explore the best model possible for doing this meaningfully. Although holding our own groups is key to shaping CASCADE, working in partnership with others - like AFKA Cymru and Kinship - enable public involvement to evolve beyond CASCADE and into organisations that work day to day with families and communities.

Supporting the Next Generation of Research Leaders

Two CASCADE researchers, Dr Harriet Lloyd and Dr Lorna Stabler, were selected for the latest round of Health and Care Research Wales Faculty Advancing Researcher Awards, recognising their growing leadership within children's social care research. The awards provide funding alongside tailored mentoring, training and networking opportunities to support the next stage of researchers' careers. Harriet's award will support research into residential family assessment centres, while Lorna's award will further develop research around kinship care and support for families.



Dr Harriet Lloyd



Dr Lorna Stabler

Supporting Research Capacity Across Wales



Dr Martin Elliott



Prof Jonathan Scourfield

CASCADE researchers continue to play an important role in strengthening research capacity within social care, both in Wales and across the UK. Martin Elliott is currently seconded two days a week to the Health and Care Research Wales Faculty as a Researcher Development Advisor, supporting the development of research capacity across Wales with a particular focus on social care. Martin Elliott and Jonathan Scourfield also serve as committee members for the NIHR Research Programme for Social Care, helping shape and support future social care research across the UK.

Contributing Research Leadership Across the Sector

Dr Nina Maxwell continues to contribute to a range of national research, policy and practice groups, reflecting CASCADE's growing role in research leadership across the sector. Alongside serving on the NIHR Health Technology Assessment (HTA) Programme Prioritisation Committee for Social Care and supporting the Health and Care Research Wales Researcher Development Awards, Nina also contributes to the Wales Youth Justice Academic Advisory Group, provides academic research advice to Cafcass, and serves as Vice Chair of the BBC Children in Need Advisory Committee for Wales. Nina is also a member of the Editorial Board for the British Journal of Social Work.



Dr Nina Maxwell

Developing Research in Neurodivergence and Care

Dr Sarah Thompson has recently completed her Health and Care Research Wales Advancing Researcher Award, building on earlier Fellowship work exploring the experiences and outcomes of neurodivergent children in foster and kinship care in Wales. Through this work, Sarah identified a range of challenges facing autistic and neurodivergent children which would benefit from further research and changes to policy and practice.



Dr Sarah Thompson



A key focus of the award has been extensive public involvement and engagement with care-experienced young people, foster carers, kinship carers, social work staff and the CASCADE Public Involvement Board. This has helped identify future research priorities and shape future funding proposals from the earliest stages, ensuring that future work is grounded in the experiences and priorities of those directly involved. Longer term, the research aims to improve understanding of diagnosis, support needs and the overlap between trauma-related and neurodivergent behaviours, helping inform future policy and practice to improve outcomes for children in care.

"In January 2026 I started my six-month visiting period in CASCADE to develop my research about advocacy for children and young people in residential care. This experience was a valuable opportunity to strengthen my research, allowing me to engage with leading experts and compare Italian perspectives with the Welsh system. I am deeply grateful to CASCADE colleagues for their openness, for sharing meaningful knowledge and ideas on children's social care and participatory research with care-experienced young people."

Glenda Cinotti
Social and Economic Processes PhD Student,
University of Milano-Bicocca, Italy



Collaboration

Partners and collaborators

Partnership and collaboration are at the heart of CASCADE's work. We work closely with academic institutions, public bodies, charities, community organisations and individuals who share our commitment to improving outcomes for children, young people and families. These collaborations strengthen the quality, relevance and impact of our research, ensuring it remains connected to policy, practice and lived experience.

Our most important partnerships are often with local authorities, practitioners, policymakers, and people with lived experience of children's social care.

Their expertise, insight and challenge help shape our research priorities, improve the quality of our work and ensure that the evidence we generate remains grounded in the realities of children's lives and services.

The organisations below represent a selection of the partners with whom we have collaborated on successful research bids, projects and initiatives during the past year. While not an exhaustive list, they reflect the breadth of relationships that underpin our work and the collaborative approach that continues to drive our research, innovation and impact.



Children in Kinship Care

There has been a growing focus on kinship care in research and practice because it has becoming increasingly clear that, while children may be best cared for within their family networks when they cannot remain with their parents, kinship families face disadvantage and a lack of support. However, there is little research focused on the experiences of children in kinship care, and even less on the experiences of racialised children in kinship care. It is important to hear from children themselves about what matters to them. Without this, it is difficult to create effective services and ensure that their needs are met. To address the gap in the research, Foundations: What Works for Children and Families put out a focused call for research in summer 2025. In collaboration with a community led organisation - Families in Harmony - Lorna and Dawn put in a successful application for funding.



The project which was funded - Kinship Care, Community and Culture - started in February 2026. It focuses on the experiences of children in kinship care who are raised by families who do not share their racial or cultural heritage.



This may be children who have more than one ethnicity, or who are raised by carers from a different culture to their own. The project will employ creative methods to enable children to share what matters most to them. Two peer researchers - Kyle and Reece - are employed to work on the project from the start. Both have experience of being in kinship care, and are peer mentors for other children in kinship care through their work with Families in Harmony.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT HIGHLIGHT

Lorna and Dawn from the CASCADE Partnership, Sharon, the founder of Families in Harmony, and Kyle and Reece met with Jahnine Davis, The National Kinship Care Ambassador in England at the start of the project to share the hopes for impact and get her advice on how to ensure the project can impact policy. Next year (May 2026 - December 2026), the team will be conducting creative workshops with children and young people and producing creative outputs.

Sure Start and Flying Start evaluations

Reducing early years inequality and child poverty can have profound effects on children's life chances. Throughout 2025–26, a CASCADE Partnership research team led by Dr Zhang has been evaluating the impact of Flying Start in Wales and Sure Start in Northern Ireland using large-scale administrative data, working closely with partners across both nations. Both programmes provide early years support to families with children under four living in some of the most disadvantaged areas in Wales and Northern Ireland.



Despite their popularity and long-standing presence, there has been surprisingly little robust evidence on the difference these policies make for children and families. At a time when every UK nation is prioritising action on inequality and child poverty, our work, developed in collaboration with policy and practice partners, offers timely insights for policymakers across the country.

Our emerging findings show that children born in Sure Start areas are significantly less likely to be referred to children's social services or to become a 'Child in Need' before age five. These are meaningful differences. With around 7,410 births each year in Sure Start areas, this translates to approximately 430 children annually who avoid entering the social services referral system, and around 293 children each year who avoid becoming a 'Child in Need' before their fifth birthday, solely due to Sure Start's presence in their community. We also find particularly positive effects for children born to younger mothers, suggesting Sure Start may be especially valuable for families facing additional vulnerabilities. Early results from the Flying Start evaluation are expected after summer 2026.

We shared our Sure Start findings at an in-person workshop in Belfast in 2026, bringing together policy officials and sector representatives to discuss the implications for practice. We have worked closely with partners at the National Children's Bureau, as well as Sure Start and Flying Start staff and families, ensuring that the research is grounded in real-world experience and that our evidence informs practice and supports ongoing efforts to reduce early years inequalities.



Children's Advocacy Project Comic Book







This project explored how advocacy services support care-experienced children and young people to have a say in decisions about their lives. The wider research focused on the advocacy and participation work taking place in a large Children's Trust. It looked at how young people understand advocacy, what helps them feel listened to and what good practice should look like in future services. The study included interviews, focus groups and workshops with care-experienced young people to shape a good practice framework for advocacy services.

The comic book was developed as a way of sharing those findings with young people in a format that felt more approachable than a written report. It follows a young person who feels overwhelmed and struggles to get their thoughts out. With support from an advocate, they are helped to express what matters to them, choose how they want to stay in contact, access information and build confidence to speak for themselves. The story reflects the key message from the research, that advocacy works best when young people feel listened to, respected and supported in ways that suit them.

The comic was shaped directly by the young people in the Trust. We worked with 25 young people aged 8-21 in creative workshops to develop ideas about the comic's style, characters, content and message. We then worked with a comic book artist to bring these ideas together. The young people were clear that the comic should show advocacy as something practical, useful and empowering, rather than as another formal service. The finished comic is now available to young people across the Trust. It supports awareness of advocacy, helps explain what an advocate can do and highlights the importance of choice, trust and communication.

Change

Creating meaningful change is central to CASCADE's work. Alongside producing high-quality research, we are committed to ensuring that evidence reaches the people, organisations and systems that can use it to improve outcomes for children, young people and families.

Our work this year highlights the growing influence of the CASCADE Partnership's research across Wales and beyond - from informing Welsh Government guidance and Senedd discussions, to supporting frontline practice, contributing to UK policy debates and influencing international approaches to care and support. Many of these examples demonstrate the importance of co-produced, practice-informed research that is grounded in lived experience and developed in collaboration with policymakers, practitioners and communities.

Key highlights of impact

- Evidence on kinship care contributed to Senedd discussions and wider policy conversations around support for kinship families in Wales.
- Research from the Improving Outcomes for Children in Care programme informed a UK Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) briefing.
- Child Criminal Exploitation safeguarding resources were recommended within Welsh Government safeguarding guidance, supporting responses to exploitation across Wales.



- The Good Practice Charter for Supporting Parents in and Leaving Care, co-produced with care-experienced parents, was adapted by CREATE Foundation Australia and shared with Child Protection Ministers across all Australian States and Territories.



- Evaluation of Family Drug and Alcohol Courts (FDACs) was referenced in Senedd discussions on care reform and contributed to national conversations about future rollout across Wales.
- Research from the Welsh Basic Income Pilot for care leavers continued to inform active policy discussions in Wales and attract growing international interest.
- Researchers contributed evidence submissions, consultations and advisory activity with Welsh Government, UK policy bodies and sector organisations, helping ensure that research informs policy and practice development across children's social care.

Supporting Care-Experienced Parents Beyond Wales

Following a visit to Melbourne in 2025, the CASCADE Partnership's Good Practice Charter for Supporting Parents in and Leaving Care has helped shape practice discussions and policy engagement across Australia. Originally developed in Wales through co-production with care-experienced parents, the Charter was shared with organisations and government departments supporting young people leaving care across Victoria.



During the visit, Louise Roberts and Rachael Vaughan engaged with a range of organisations including the Victorian Government, CREATE Foundation, Lighthouse Foundation, Brotherhood of St Laurence and the Brave Foundation.

The collaboration has since led to CREATE Foundation co-producing its own Australian version of the Charter. This has now been presented to the Federal Minister for Social Services and distributed to Child Protection Ministers across all Australian States and Territories, with discussions underway around formal endorsement.



The Charter also gained wider international exposure through presentations at the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare's event *Lessons from the UK and Ireland: Pathways Beyond Care* and the Home Stretch Symposium, attended by more than 300 delegates from across Australia. The work demonstrates how research and co-produced approaches developed within the CASCADE Partnership are continuing to influence conversations, practice and policy beyond Wales.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT HIGHLIGHT

A particular highlight was attending CREATE Foundation's Young Expert Advisory Group, where care-experienced young people directly discussed the Charter and shared insights from their own experiences.

Shaping the Future and Family Drug and Alcohol Courts

Family Drug and Alcohol Courts (FDACs) offer an alternative to standard care proceedings where parental substance misuse is a factor. The same specially trained judge oversees each case, supported by a multidisciplinary team that helps parents address their substance use. The approach is collaborative rather than adversarial, and aims to give families a genuine chance to stay together while keeping children's welfare central.



While the evaluation itself concluded in 2024, it continues to shape policy discussions about the future of family justice and care proceedings in Wales and beyond. In 2021, the Welsh Government commissioned a two-year FDAC pilot in Cardiff and the Vale of Glamorgan – the first of its kind in Wales. The CASCADE Partnership was commissioned by the Centre for Justice Innovation (CJI) to evaluate it. Between January 2022 and January 2024, we interviewed families and professionals, observed hearings, and analysed administrative data to understand how FDAC worked and what conditions facilitated it.

Stakeholders close to the service felt FDAC gave families something fundamentally different from standard proceedings, and early signals on outcomes were encouraging.

We also developed programme theories explaining the mechanisms through which FDAC produces change.

Although the evaluation concluded in 2024, its findings continue to feed directly into policy debate. Within Wales, the pilot was a subject of repeated discussion in the Senedd, including correspondence between the Children, Young People and Education Committee and Welsh Government ministers. David Westlake and Melissa Meindl (the researchers who did the project) gave evidence at the committee alongside colleagues from CJI. FDAC featured prominently in the Committee's If not now, then when? inquiry report on radical reform for care experienced children, which recommended that Welsh Government continue rolling out FDAC across Wales.

The evaluation produced positive findings, contributing to a body of evidence that suggests FDACs are experienced positively by families, that they help reduce the need for children to enter care and they save public money overall by doing so.

The evaluation has also had a impact well beyond Wales. Lord Justice Peter Jackson, national lead judge for FDAC, described our final report as "an excellent document" in his 2024 conference speech to the Association of Lawyers for Children, drawing on its findings - including the voices of Welsh parents and professionals - to argue the case for FDAC's continued expansion.

5. Public Involvement, Engagement & Dissemination

Throughout the year, academics from across the CASCADE partnership delivered workshops, seminars, keynote presentations and webinars with practitioners, policymakers and researchers across Wales and internationally. Activity included presentations at conferences in Denmark, Sweden, Australia, New Zealand, Indonesia and the United States, alongside practitioner-focused workshops and events across Wales and the UK.

Researchers contributed to podcasts, webinars and public discussions on areas including kinship care, child criminal exploitation, AI and social work judgement, advocacy, leadership and participation. CASCADE Partnership research also featured in media coverage, conference panels, policy discussions and professional development activity with organisations including Welsh Government, Social Care Wales, CORAM BAAF and the BBC.

The CASCADE partnership continued to strengthen connections between research and practice through collaborative workshops, advisory activity, practitioner events and dissemination work, helping ensure that research findings are accessible, relevant and connected to the realities of frontline social care practice.

Public Involvement



CASCADE's public involvement work continues to grow in scale, diversity and impact, bringing together children, young people and families to shape research and influence change.

In 2025–2026, we delivered **47 involvement activities**, engaging **273 individuals** across our standing groups and project-based activities. This reflects our continued commitment to embedding lived experience at every stage of our work.

Public Involvement Participants & Activities



	Participants	Activities
CASCADE Involvement Board	17	4
CASCADE Voices	28	6
CASCADE Parents Group	45	12
Other	183	25

Expanding Peer Research

This year we significantly strengthened our Peer Research model, ensuring that lived experience is central to our research design and delivery.

- A parent Peer Researcher continued to play a leading role in our **Parent Advocacy and Family Voice** project.
- We recruited **four care-experienced Peer Researchers**, supported by Voices From Care Cymru, to contribute to our work exploring the Personal Adviser role for care leavers in Wales.
- Our **Kinship Care project** also welcomed two Peer Researchers, supporting meaningful engagement with children living in kinship care.

These roles not only enrich the quality and relevance of our research, but also create valuable opportunities for individuals to develop skills and influence change.



Co-production in Action: Publications

Our **CASCADE Parents Group** reached a major milestone this year, co-authoring two peer-reviewed publications that highlight both their journey and their impact:

- A paper in the British Journal of Social Work explores the development and growth of the Parents Group.
- A second publication in Social Sciences reflects on their contributions to research on Peer Parental Advocacy.

These achievements demonstrate the power of long-term, meaningful involvement in research.



National Recognition

Building on this success, the Parents Group was awarded the **Public Involvement Award** at the Health and Care Research Wales conference.

As one member reflected:
"I've found it incredibly empowering to be part of an award-winning group. It shows how important it is to include lived experience in research."



Influencing Funding Decisions

CASCADE also supported care-experienced young people to engage directly with the **NIHR funding process**, including reviewing applications and contributing to panel discussions on funding decisions.

One participant described the experience as:
"so interesting and insightful... I was really glad to have taken part."

This work represents a significant step in ensuring that those with lived experience are influencing not only research design, but also what research gets funded.





Sector Engagement

Connecting Research with Frontline Practice

Over the past year, Professor David Wilkins delivered a series of workshops and webinars with local authorities and practitioners in England and Ireland, focusing on reflective supervision, communication skills and the emerging role of artificial intelligence in social work. These sessions reached well over 250 practitioners, managers and leaders working in children's and adults' services.



Prof David Wilkins

A major strand of this work focused on reflective supervision and "having conversations that count", supporting supervisors and social workers to think about how supervision can provide emotional support, create space for reflective thinking, and strengthen purposeful practice. Workshops were delivered with local authority partners and leadership programmes, using practical exercises, real-world examples and direct application to frontline work.

Alongside this, David delivered workshops and invited talks on AI, judgement and decision-making in social work, including sessions exploring how tools such as ChatGPT compare with social workers when making forecasts about risk and harm. These sessions encouraged practitioners to engage critically with AI rather than simply accepting or rejecting it, with a strong focus on ethics, transparency and the future of professional judgement.



The workshops created opportunities for mutual learning between research, education and practice, helping connect research with the practical realities of social work.



What is good leadership in child protection services?

The Leadership in Child Protection project, led by Charlotte Waits, an ethnographic PhD student examining how leadership is accomplished in everyday child protection practice within local authority children's services. Based at CASCADE and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, the research asks a central question: how, where and when can leadership be seen in child protection social work, and to what effect?



Charlotte Waits

The project began with a review of the literature identifying three contrasting approaches to leadership in children's services, before moving into ethnographic fieldwork within a London local authority. This included shadowing senior practice leaders, observing meetings and practice forums, and undertaking ethnographic interviews with leaders and managers across children's services.

The ethnographic approach allowed the research to remain closely connected to everyday practice, with observations and ethnographic interviews helping to refine the focus of the study as fieldwork progressed. Final-stage interviews have recently been completed with six participant leaders across four local authorities to explore preliminary findings and support discussion about leadership practice and organisational change.

The project matters because leadership and practice models are frequently promoted as important drivers of improvement in children's services, yet there is little empirical evidence about how they shape frontline practice and decision-making. Emerging findings suggest that visible, relational and values-based leadership can help shift organisational cultures towards more collaborative, child-first ways of working.



Early work from the project was shared with the Welsh Government. Preliminary ethnographic findings have since been presented to academic and practitioner audiences at CASCADE, Cardiff Business School, the European Conference for Social Work Research in Munich, the University of Waikato in New Zealand, and the national network of practice leaders within Oranga Tamariki, New Zealand's Ministry for Children.

6. Conclusion

This year has not been without difficulties. Higher Education is facing systemic problems at present, and these have direct and indirect effects on our Partnership. More significantly we unexpectedly lost a valued member of our team – Dr. Helen Hodges. Helen was a kind, funny and passionate part of our Partnership. Her work focused on youth crime, including several influential and important studies. Her death left us as a Centre shocked and sad. You can read her obituary here https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/obituaries/obituary/dr-helen-hodges . I was also very saddened at the death of Dr Laura Bunting, who worked closely with us in Health and Care Research Wales to support the Partnership and whose support and challenge were instrumental in building our work.

There have also been challenges related to our success. Setting up new Centres, running complicated projects, developing international collaborations and the many other activities you can read about in these pages all take time. As a consequence we perpetually run near or beyond capacity.

Yet despite these challenges we enter 2026 with enormous energy and enthusiasm for the future. Each year when I end one of these Reports I try to give a flavour of what might be in next year's report. In preparation for writing this I re-read them - and am delighted to say they have usually been a good indication of what is to come!

So, here is what we have planned for the year ahead. We are launching a new strategy which will focus our work on four key areas – reducing inequality, supporting loving relationships, enhancing professional practice and understanding how to create change in organisations and systems. This is an opportunity to improve our communication, sector engagement and the quality of our research. We are introducing a new focus on practice series, with people with lived experience sharing what matters to them. We plan to introduce a new Consultancy service to allow us to do smaller pieces of work that require a nimbler response. And we will build on our existing Partnerships and the new Centres we have developed to carry out innovative research that – as ever – aims to make a difference.

This year's report gives an indication of the scope and quality of our work. The most exciting thing about being Director of the CASCADE Partnership is seeing so many across the partnership who are committed to continuing and building on the exciting work covered in this report.

Professor Donald Forrester
Director of CASCADE Partnership