An Evaluation of the Step Up Step Down Pilot Programme in Pembrokeshire

Executive Summary

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Our expertise brings together an exceptional partnership. CASCADE is the leading centre for evaluative research in children's social care in the UK and sits within the School of Social and Spatial Sciences (SOSSS), a leading centre of excellence in social sciences and education research with particular expertise in quantitative methods. The Centre for Trials Research (CTR) is an acknowledged national leader for trials and related methods, the School of Psychology was ranked 2nd for research quality in the most recent Research Excellence Framework and SAIL provides world-class data linkage. Together we believe we can create a step-change in the quality and use of children's social care research that is unparalleled in the UK. Specifically, we can deliver high quality trials and evaluations; link data to understand long-term outcomes and involve service users (our public) in all elements of our research. Our intention is that these three strands will interact to generate an unrivalled quality of research.

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Summary

This evaluation focussed on the implementation of the Step Up Step Down programme in Wales, which supported families on the edge of care, with the aim being to reduce the number of children coming into care and to support the bonds and capacities of families. The evaluation was conducted in two phases to ensure that it would involve both implementation sites of the Step Up Step Down programme in Wales, Pembrokeshire and Powys. This executive summary focusses on the Step Up Step Down pilot in Pembrokeshire. Further detail on the evaluation and its findings is provided in the full report (Mannay et al. 2026).

In the evaluation period, 12 families (23 children) successfully stepped down from the service, with an average involvement of 14 months. Among families who engaged with the programme in Pembrokeshire, the service achieved a 95% success rate, with 22 of the 23 children supported maintaining care arrangements at home. At the end of the evaluation period, the service was supporting 11 families (26 children), with an additional five families awaiting allocation. The evaluation involved children, parents and Family Support Foster Carers, as well as staff working directly for The Fostering Network in Wales, social workers and Local Authority Senior Leads who were involved in the commissioning, organisation and delivery of Step Up Step Down.

The evidence generated in this evaluation suggests that the combination of all elements of the Step Up Step Down pilot worked effectively to support families who gained capacity, skills and knowledge, and built supportive networks, which contributed to stable family relationships. The positive experiences of those involved, alongside the programme's success in supporting children to remain safely within, or return to, their families, provide important evidence to support the continued development and wider implementation of Step Up Step Down in Wales.

What we do

- Generate internationally recognised primary research evidence
- Make our research accessible to all, including; service users, professionals and policymakers.
- Develop social care research capacity in Wales by providing opportunities for researchers from undergraduate through to senior career stages.
- Engage a range of collaborators in research, including children and young people, parents and carers, practitioners, policymakers and social care providers from the public, private and third sectors.

How we do it

- The only centre of its kind in Wales – promoting evidence, improving outcomes
- A diverse range of research methods – Ethnography, interviews and focus groups, cohort and routine data sets, quasi-experiments, randomised controlled trials and reviews (rapid, systematic and realist)
- Strong links with policy and practice – Parents and children, social workers and senior managers, government (Welsh and UK) and the third sector

Introduction and Background

Children's social care in Wales faces a 'crisis in care' characterised by rising numbers of children entering care, pressures on care provision, a shortage of suitable placements, difficulties recruiting and retaining foster carers, and increasing demands on the social care workforce. These challenges highlight the need for preventative and edge-of-care approaches that support children to remain safely within their families wherever possible.

Step Up Step Down is a programme that offers families a comprehensive package of support to prevent problems from escalating, improve relationships, and build networks of support.

Families are matched with a Family Support Foster Carer who provides mentoring and practical support to parents, as well as short breaks for children and young people. Wider support is provided over a 12–15-month period, which includes parent training programmes, children's groups and family activities in the community.

Following positive evaluations of the intervention in Northern Ireland, the Welsh Government provided £879,000 to The Fostering Network in Wales to pilot the Step Up Step Down programme within the Pembrokeshire and Powys Local Authority areas over three years (Welsh Government, 2025). The Pembrokeshire and Powys pilots of Step Up Step Down were also supported by the KPMG Foundation who provided a grant of £450,000.

CASCADE, the Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre at Cardiff University, was commissioned by The Fostering Network in Wales to evaluate the Step Up Step Down pilots in Wales. This executive summary presents the findings from the first evaluation report, which focuses on the implementation of the programme in Pembrokeshire.

Overview of the Evaluation

The evaluation was undertaken between April 2024 and March 2026 and explored the implementation of the Step Up Step Down programme in Pembrokeshire, identifying areas of good practice and opportunities for further development. It sought to include the experiences and perspectives of those involved in initiating, delivering and engaging with the programme and to examine how the intervention contributed to its intended outcomes. These included preventing or reducing the number of children looked after, building families' knowledge, skills and confidence, strengthening relationships and networks of support.

The methods of the evaluation were qualitative interviews with seven parents (P), including follow-up interviews with three parents to explore changes in their experiences over time, five Family Support Foster Carers (FSFC), two social workers (SW), two members of staff from The Fostering Network in Wales (TFNW), and two Local Authority Senior Leads (LASL). Eight children participated in creative workshops designed to explore their experiences of the programme. In addition, there were observations of Family Days, a Nurture Group and Children's Summer Scheme. There was also an analysis of routine feedback collected by The Fostering Network in Wales following training sessions, which provided further insight into the delivery and perceived impact of the service.

Ethical approval for the study was granted by Cardiff University's Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. The research was undertaken by experienced researchers who were aware of the sensitivities associated with the study and took care to ensure that participants were engaged ethically and sensitively throughout the research process.

Findings

The evaluation explored the implementation of the Step Up Step Down pilot in Pembrokeshire, examining the establishment of the service, the relational and practical support provided to families, the activities delivered for children, parents and families, and the parenting training that formed key elements of the programme.

Initiation of Step Up Step Down in Pembrokeshire

Participants described how the opportunity to pilot an evidence-based intervention, supported by dedicated Welsh Government funding and funding from the KPMG Foundation, enabled Pembrokeshire to implement Step Up Step Down. However, the evaluation also highlighted the challenges of introducing a new preventative service within an already pressured children's social care system. These included shortages of foster carers and workforce capacity pressures within the Local Authority.

Overcoming these challenges involved recruiting experienced foster carers whose values aligned with the aims and ethos of Step Up Step Down. Some carers described taking on the role because they wanted to continue supporting children and families after stepping back from full-time fostering. This enabled their skills and experience to be retained by the Local Authority. The enthusiasm and reputation of the lead social worker also encouraged carers to become involved.

The partnership model of Step Up Step Down enabled responsibilities to be shared with The Fostering Network in Wales. Nevertheless, successful implementation depended on the willingness of already stretched professionals to invest additional time and effort in establishing the programme. This commitment was underpinned by a shared belief in the value of family support, and the perceived benefits (individual and economic) of preventing family breakdown.

> ***"Whilst people were tired and overworked, and, you know, under enormous pressure, I also understood that people still had capacity to be excited about something, and people's services values were about doing the right thing for children and families." (LASL1)***

Whilst informed by the Northern Ireland programme, flexibility was essential to ensure that Step Up Step Down could be implemented successfully within the Pembrokeshire context. Adaptations were made to reflect the rural nature of the county, local workforce capacity, and the needs of participating families. Rather than reducing programme quality, participants viewed this flexibility as a strength, adapting to local circumstances while retaining the programme's core relational principles.

The evaluation found that Step Up Step Down was able to support families with a wide range of needs. Access to the service was often determined less by the nature of presenting difficulties and more by factors such as families' readiness to engage and the availability of an appropriate match with a Family Support Foster Carer. However, there were instances where referrals were considered inappropriate because families required specialist interventions beyond the remit of the programme.

> ***"It is catching families at that point where they are ready to make those changes, they are going to engage with it, because the ones that I think we do see that benefit from the programme the most, and make those changes, are the ones that engage with all elements of it." (TFNW1)***

Building networks of support

The evaluation found that relationships were the foundation of the Step Up Step Down programme. The consistency, availability and flexibility of support provided by Family Support Foster Carers, alongside social workers and staff from The Fostering Network in Wales, enabled trusting relationships to develop with parents and children. The intensive relational work undertaken by Family Support Foster Carers was supported through regular individual and peer support.

> ***"Well, if we need support, they'll get it for us, won't they... the people that are running it are amazing you can't beat 'em... they make a difference don't they, no matter what time of day it is... It's not like every job, it's not 9 'til 5 really, is it?" (P2)***

Family Support Foster Carers provided tailored emotional and practical support that was highly valued by parents. Alongside parenting advice and mentoring, they offered emotional support, advocacy, assistance in liaising with other professionals and organisations, and practical help, including transport and accompanying parents to appointments.

> ***[FSFC] comes here to help me, and she's understood [child]... which is good because she can understand... she understands me, and I tell her like, you know, "[child]'s not well, she's had a wobble." All that. And she says, "Right, we'll talk through it". And then, she explains "This is what probably has triggered it" ... And then, I can phone her up and she supports me as well. So, she's always on the end of a phone (P6)***

Short breaks were an important element of the programme, but their delivery required ongoing negotiation with families and needed to remain responsive to their individual circumstances, histories and preferences.

The programme strengthened families' wider support networks as parents developed supportive relationships with one another through Step Up Step Down activities. In addition, a flexible approach to ending support enabled relationships between parents, families, Family Support Foster Carers, social workers and staff from The Fostering Network in Wales to continue after regular individualised support had ended. Continued access to events, activities and training helped families to feel supported beyond the formal intervention.

The evaluation explored the use of the For Mi App as a tool to support communication and goal setting. Whilst participants valued the app for sharing messages, photographs and recording progress, engagement was mixed and barriers relating to technology and functionality were identified. Parents expressed a desire for greater opportunities to connect with one another through the app, whilst Family Support Foster Carers identified the need for a secure space to record sensitive information.

Activities for children, parents and families

The evaluation found that the activities and groups provided through Step Up Step Down were highly valued by children, parents and professionals. Although only a small number of children contributed directly to the evaluation, those who participated in the Nurture Group and Children's Summer Scheme communicated positive feelings about the sessions and talked about their favourite activities, the refreshments provided, the relationships they developed with peers and facilitators, and their sadness when the Nurture Group ended. Indirect feedback from the Girls Group indicated that children had enjoyed the sessions and valued opportunities to play and to discuss their feelings.

> ***"It help[s] me find my feelings and not get angry at things." (Girls Group participant)***

Adult participants also reflected positively on the Nurture Group, describing improvements in children's understanding, expression and regulation of emotions. Parents reported that children continued to use strategies and resources to discuss and regulate their emotions, outside of the sessions.

Family Days, residentials and wellbeing sessions for parents received positive feedback. These activities enabled families to access experiences that would otherwise have been difficult because of financial pressures or anxieties about managing family challenges in new settings. Parents reported that the non-judgemental and supportive environment enabled them to feel comfortable participating, and they valued the opportunities and experiences available to their children. These activities created positive family memories and facilitated supportive connections between families. Likewise, the wellbeing sessions, bringing together parents, Family Support Foster Carers, social workers and staff from The Fostering Network in Wales, further enhanced the feeling of togetherness and being part of a supportive community.

The evaluation found that some parents continued to engage with activities first experienced through Step Up Step Down. With dedicated programme funding, the programme also helped

families pursue interests, access support and make connections within their local communities. These activities were considered an important part of the programme's preventative approach and encouraged the development of sustainable networks that offered social contact, support and enrichment experiences for both parents and children.

> ***"[Step Up Step Down] is making sure that the whole family as a unit are looked after, and it's the first lot of people we've been involved in that have made sure the family as a unit are being looked after, rather than, okay, you're having trouble with this one specific child, we're just going to do what we can for her. So, it has been nice actually being recognised as a struggling parent or like, it's like, siblings are struggling, or... family life isn't always great... I feel like we're all being looked after, and all of our emotions and needs are being like, taken into account. So, they've never singled out any of us or like, removed any of us from a situation just because [one child] is the one that initially needs the help. They've always made sure that all of us as a whole are included in anything that they do." (P7)***

Parent training programmes

EMBRACE and BOND parent training programmes were highly valued by both parents and Family Support Foster Carers. EMBRACE focused on supporting parents to understand children's emotions and behaviour, whilst BOND focused on attachment, trauma and brain development to strengthen parents' understanding of children's behaviour and relationships.

Opportunities to build relationships, share experiences and spend time together before and after sessions helped parents feel comfortable participating, while attending alongside their Family Support Foster Carers further strengthened supportive relationships. Parents praised the facilitators' knowledge, enthusiasm and delivery, describing the training as more engaging, relevant and responsive than parenting courses they had previously attended.

> ***"I started working with Step Up Step Down [date] and I just thought it's going to be a waste of time, it's just going to be another group that I've done, so many of these, and it's just going to be boring. But the first time, it's literally been the only group that I've gone to and learnt things, but nobody is judgemental. You know, you can see they genuinely care about you and your child." (P3)***

Parents described the training as helping them to better understand their children, whilst the content was delivered in a way that ensured they did not feel blamed. Both parents and Family Support Foster Carers similarly described applying learning from the training when engaging with children.

"I really thought it was good last year. It certainly helped me with [child], with the PACE [Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy]... And then you get feedback from the parents saying yeah, we tried that, yeah, that works. And that's really good." (FSFC2)

Conclusion

The evidence generated in this evaluation positions Step Up Step Down as a valuable preventative intervention that contributes to keeping families together and supporting families to thrive.

During the evaluation period, 12 families (23 children) successfully stepped down from the programme following an average involvement of 14 months. Among families who engaged with the programme, the service achieved a 95% success rate, with 22 of the 23 children supported maintaining care arrangements at home. At the end of the evaluation period, the service continued to support a further 11 families (26 children), with five families awaiting allocation. Supporting children to remain safely within their families has the potential to reduce pressures on care provision and the associated costs and resource demands. Whilst it is difficult to determine what would have happened in the absence of the intervention, the 95% success rate is an important numerical indicator, particularly when considered alongside the qualitative accounts of those involved.

"Were the children we got involved with prevented from coming into care? Certainly, some of them, yes. So, we kept the numbers lower than they otherwise would have been as a result of this project." (LASL1)

The overwhelmingly positive reflections of children, parents, Family Support Foster Carers, social workers, Local Authority Senior Leads and staff from The Fostering Network in Wales suggest that the combined elements of the programme made an important contribution to supporting families. They contributed to children remaining safely within, or returning to, their families, enabled parents and children to gain knowledge, skills and confidence, build supportive relationships and develop stronger connections to their communities. Importantly, parents directly attributed children remaining safely within, or returning to, their care to the support they received through Step Up Step Down. The development of enduring relationships between parents, children, Family Support Foster Carers and other families participating in Step Up Step Down was consistently described as the programme's "golden thread", supporting sustainable change beyond the period of formal intervention.

"And now, I don't look back, I keep looking forward. I had no-one to turn to, but Step Up Step Down got me through it, and they're still there... But I know without them... [child] wouldn't have been here. [Child] would have gone, because I couldn't have handled it. But with the support and that, she's changed." (P6)

The evidence generated through this evaluation also informed recommendations to support the continued development and wider implementation of Step Up Step Down in Wales. These focus on three areas: strengthening the evidence base through further evaluation and economic analysis; supporting continued policy investment in preventative and edge-of-care services; and refining programme delivery to build on learning from the Pembrokeshire pilot whilst maintaining the core relational principles of the model.

This report represents the first stage of the independent evaluation of the Step Up Step Down pilots in Wales. The evaluation will continue to explore the implementation and outcomes of the programme in Powys, providing further evidence to inform the future development of Step Up Step Down in Wales.

Reference

Mannay, D., Roberts, L., Stevenson, S. and Baker, E. 2026. *An Evaluation of the Step Up Step Down Pilot Programme in Pembrokeshire*: Cardiff: CASCADE. Available at - https://cascadewales.org/research/step-up-step-down/



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