

# The children's views digest

Dr Roger Morgan OBE, Children's Rights Director for England



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# Introduction

Roger Morgan, Children's Rights Director for England



I have served children as the Children's Rights Director for England from 2001 to the repeal of the role in 2014. Throughout that time, I have had a legal duty to 'ascertain the views' of children and young people in my remit – that is children in care, children receiving social care services, care leavers, children placed for adoption, children living in residential family centres, and children living away from home in all types of boarding school and college, including boarding prep and public schools, local authority boarding schools, residential special schools and residential further education colleges.

This is my last report of children's views as Children's Rights Director, summarising the views and experiences children gave us in our statutory consultations with them in the decade between 2004 and 2014. It is intended as a 'digest' in one place of the children's views on many rights, welfare and safeguarding subjects, given to me and my team at the Office of the Children's Rights Director and published in our series of children's views reports. It incorporates and builds upon my earlier publications summarising children's main messages on care.

The digest begins with the subject of children's rights themselves, summarising reports giving children's views on children's rights and responsibilities, and their experience of receiving the rights set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. I have gone on to summarise the children's own assessment of children's social care services, as given in the latest *Children's care monitor* report published in 2014. Then I have summarised children's views on the key issue of safeguarding, from our specific consultations on that subject.

The digest continues with summaries of children's views reports on specific issues from my team's consultations over the past decade, in chronological order from 2004 to 2014. It ends with brief summaries of the advice children have given to successive Children's Ministers in the series of 'Ministerial Quarterly' meetings we have arranged and chaired in recent years.

The views of children are essential to all involved in developing children's policy, providing children's services, or inspecting services for children. Their views are thoughtful, to the point, often surprising and innovative, and set out the experience of our services by the users of those services. Some clear common themes come through the reports summarised in this digest, reinforced by different children in different consultations at different times.

The contents of this digest, as of all my children's views reports, are purely the views of children, without my own comments and without selection according to whether I, the government, professionals, any organisation or other researchers agree with or dislike what the children have said.

I hope that you will find this quick reference digest both illuminating and a real contribution to your work with and for children.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Roger Morgan'.



# Children on rights and responsibilities

*Children on rights and responsibilities, October 2006*

*Children on rights and responsibilities, March 2014*

The first of these two reports sets out what children themselves saw as both their rights and their responsibilities.

Children told us they wanted the right to: feel safe – not to be abused, bullied, hit, abandoned, or subjected to racism; be looked after and given help when needed; not have decisions made for them by people they don't know; have somewhere stable in their life; be asked and listened to; have their own property; say no to a new placement; have choices; have no rules without reasons; have privacy and private problems kept confidential; not have repeated punishments for the same offence; know about their parents and family and be able to keep in contact with them; have where they live treated as their home and not just where staff work; have teachers they get on with; learn, make mistakes, and go back to something they don't understand; have a chance of a good job and university if they are good enough; play and make and keep friends; know what is happening; be treated fairly and not treated as stupid because they have problems; if in care, not miss out on what those not in care would have or do; be listened to and not just told; not lose out on a right because someone else abused it; and be respected and trusted with responsibilities.

Children told us they had a responsibility to: help others, especially those who are younger, who have a disability, need caring for or are upset; respect people and not bully or harass others; look after a pet if they have one; look after themselves and their possessions properly; take responsibility for their own actions, and for using advice they get; keep themselves safe and not harm others; give their views and make choices when given the opportunities to do so; know the difference between right and wrong, and keep to the law and rules that apply to them; make good use of their education, try to get a job and work hard at it; not treat care staff badly; learn to take on more responsibilities as they get older and to learn from their mistakes.

Our second report on rights and responsibilities gave the views of 1,888 children on what children's rights and responsibilities should go into any future bill, charter or Act of Parliament setting out UK citizens' rights and responsibilities.

A right was defined as something you should always be able to do, to have, to know, or to say, or a protection you should always have from something. A responsibility was defined as something everyone is expected to do, for themselves, for other people or for the world we live in.

Children were in favour of rights and responsibilities being set down in a single document, to tell people their rights and what was expected of them, and to set out rights such as being listened to and treated fairly.

Rights should be:  
'taken for granted –  
just the norm'

Responsibility:  
'to be responsible'

Here are the top 10 children's rights voted by children as most important.

**The top 10 rights voted as most important by children:**

1. To be protected from abuse
2. To have an education
3. To be kept alive and well
4. Not to be discriminated against because of my race, colour, sex, language, disability or beliefs
5. Not to be treated or punished in a way that is cruel or meant to make me feel bad about myself
6. Special help for any child with a disability
7. To have privacy
8. Not to be bullied
9. To keep in touch with my parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters if I want to and they want to, wherever we all live
10. To have my private letters, phone calls, emails and messages kept confidential

The rights not to be bullied, and to keep in touch with family, are new rights sought by children through this consultation. The others came from the Human Rights Act or the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

**'We should have the right to take responsibility'**

Analysing children's reasons for supporting particular rights led to nine absolute human rights according to children.

**The nine absolute human rights according to children:**

1. The right to be safe from harm
2. The right to well-being
3. The right to be alive and well
4. The right to learning and education
5. The right to enjoy life
6. The right to be oneself
7. The right of all people to be treated equally and fairly
8. The right to socialise with other people
9. The right to have a say in one's own life

Finally, here are the top 10 children's responsibilities according to the children consulted.

**The top 10 responsibilities seen as most important by children.**

1. Responsibility for your own behaviour and actions
2. Making use of your education
3. Showing respect to others
4. Responsibility for your own safety
5. Looking after others
6. Looking after yourself
7. Your own health and hygiene
8. Carrying out your responsibilities around the house
9. Looking after the environment
10. Giving your opinion



# Getting children's rights under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

*Looked after in England*, March 2007

*The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: how children say the UK is doing*, February 2014

The first of these reports gave children's views back in 2007 on how well children's services were keeping to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and on meeting concerns children have raised about their care in recent years.

Children said that an area is good to live in if they have activities to do, live near friends, have a nice environment and access to good education. They said an area is bad for children to live in if there are gangs, vandals and bullies, few activities, and they are away from family and friends. The best way to improve an area would be to provide more activities for children.

Many (45%) thought life was getting safer for children; 37% thought it was getting more dangerous.

Children in 2007 voted that they were getting these rights from the UN Convention 'well' or 'very well': being able to have their own thoughts about things, being able to follow their own religion, being safe in the building they live in, being allowed to speak their own

language, having good-quality homes, seeing a doctor or dentist when needed, having healthy food and drink, and not being discriminated against. They said that they are getting these rights 'just about OK': getting help from adults when needed, feeling safe at school, being able to enjoy themselves, having their views taken seriously, feeling safe in the countryside, having their say about things that matter to them, getting an education that helps them do the best they can, and being safe in town.

Half of those we consulted in 2007 said nothing was getting worse about the help they get from adults and services, one in 10 said that nothing was getting better.

Our second report, in 2014, came from consultation with 2,424 children in preparation for the UN review of the UK's compliance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. These consultations were with children in the Children's Rights Director's remit – that is, children in care or receiving social care services, and children living away from home in residential education.

The box shows the children's scoring for 15 key rights in the UN Convention. The higher the percentage score, the more children had said they were getting that right.



### Children's experience of getting key rights under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

1. Every child has the right to have the education they need (at school, at college or from a tutor): 93.5%
2. You have the right to be healthy, and to get treatment if you need it: 92.6%
3. Every child has the right to a decent standard of living: 90.1%
4. You have the right to be kept safe from all sorts of harm (such as being injured, neglected, sexually abused or treated violently): 89.7%
5. Children have the right to play and do fun activities: 89.4%
6. You should be given the care you need: 87.8%
7. You have the right to join in with other children and young people, as long as this isn't harming anyone: 85%
8. You have the right to have your own opinions and your own religion, as long as you aren't harming anyone else: 82.8%
9. You have the right to your own privacy, for yourself, and for your letters or messages to other people: 81.2%
10. You have the right to say what you really think, as long as this isn't harmful to other people: 76.9%
11. If you are old enough to understand it, you have the right to give your views on anything that affects you: 76.3%
12. Every decision should be made in your best interests: 73.2%
13. You have the right not to have people attacking your reputation: 72.1%
14. You have the right to find out things you want to know: 71.6%
15. If you are old enough to understand, you have the right to have your views taken into account by people making decisions about you: 70.6%

Remembering that the children consulted were in care, receiving social care support, or living away from home in residential education, 44% of the children were not being brought up by their own parents. Two thirds thought this separation was in their best interests. Of those not living with their birth parents, 93% knew their birth parents. Eighty-six per cent of children in care could keep in touch with their birth parents.

Children in the survey reported their views being most sought by their school or college (94% reporting being asked for their views there), followed by their family (71%), then by a hobby organisation they are a member of (27%).

Ten per cent of children in the survey reported being asked for their views by the government, 17% by their local council and 12% by their local hospital.

Being asked for views, and views then making a difference, were two very different issues. Children's views were most taken into account at home (where 87% said their views made a difference), followed by school or college (74%), then by other children or young people (54%). Forty-two per cent reported their views making a difference when doctors or nurses made decisions about them.

Of children who had been the subject of a decision made by the court, 29% reported that the court had taken their views 'a lot' into account, but 37% that the court had not taken their views into account at all.

Of children who reported themselves as having a disability, 90% reported that they were helped usually or all the time to enjoy a full and active life.

Eighty-one per cent of all children responding reported having a passport, and 93% of those without a passport stated that they knew which country any future passport should say they were from.

Twenty per cent of children responding described themselves as having a different race, country, language, religion or culture from most other children around them. Of these, 63% reported being from a different country, 61% being of a different race, 49% being of a different culture, 43% mostly speaking a different language and 39% being of a different religion. Twenty-three per cent reported having difficulty keeping to their own language, 20% difficulty in keeping to their own culture and 15% difficulty keeping to their own religion.

Fifteen per cent of all the children reported having a job of some sort, and of those, 58% were paid for their work, 70% had chosen their jobs for themselves, 28% described their work as voluntary work and 18% were doing jobs that formed part of their own school or college work. Seventy-six per cent were happy to carry on doing their current jobs. Of those who answered questions about their jobs, 15% described their job as 'sometimes dangerous' (just under 2% of the total number of children in the survey) and 6% (under 1% of all in the survey) said their job keeps them working too many hours.

Seventy-three per cent of those in the survey reported being helped to keep themselves clear of illegal drugs, but disabled children were less likely to report being helped in this way.

Eighty-one per cent in the survey stated that they had never been punished in a cruel way, while 12% reported that they had been punished in a way they considered cruel. (The Office of the Children's Rights Director has followed up concerns in such reports.) Nineteen per cent reported being physically held or restrained to stop them doing something dangerous or damaging things.

In relation to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 31% had heard of this before completing our survey, but 54% said they had never heard of the UN Convention.

Seventy-four per cent thought that the UK is 'good' or 'very good' at making sure children have their rights, and 60% thought the UK is getting better at making sure children have their rights. Ten per cent thought the UK is getting worse at making sure children have their rights.

Disabled children reported less freedom generally to hold their own opinions and religion, to say what they really think or to express their views – but they were more likely than others to report being asked their views in hospital, and that their views made a difference to decisions made about them by doctors and nurses. They were also more likely to report their views making a difference at school or college. Disabled children also reported having less privacy than children generally.



# Children's care monitor

*Children's care monitor 2008*, August 2008

*Children's care monitor 2009*, December 2009

*Children's care monitor 2010*, March 2011

*Children's care monitor 2011*, February 2012

*Children's care monitor 2013*, March 2014

The *Children's care monitor* is a regular assessment by children themselves of the state of social care in England. It was started in 2008, and has become much used by successive governments as an authoritative source of information about how care is doing from the child's point of view. The *Monitor* covers keeping safe, bullying, having a say in what happens, making complaints, education, experience of care, care planning and leaving care.

These are selected findings for the last *Monitor* carried out by the Office of the Children's Rights Director, for the year 2013 (published in 2014), and based on the views of 2,305 children that year.

Children felt safest in the building where they live, next safest at school or college, next in the countryside, and least safe in towns or cities. Ninety-three per cent felt safe or very safe in the building where they lived, and 76% in towns and cities.

The greatest danger to children and young people was seen as drugs, followed by bullying, alcohol, strangers and knives. Being with trusted adults was the most usual thing children told us would make them feel safer. Thirty-two per cent (a reducing proportion) worry a little or a lot about their safety. Almost a quarter of children (24%) said that over the past year they had had an accident or injury which had needed medical attention from a doctor or in hospital.

Children feeling unsafe were most likely to go for help to a friend; 57% said they were most likely to tell a friend first. Next most likely were teachers, police, parents and foster carers.

Nine per cent of children reported being bullied often or always, 29% that they were being bullied sometimes, often or always, and 52% that they were never bullied. Sixteen per cent often or always worried about getting bullied – there is slightly more worrying about bullying than actual bullying. The highest reported bullying rate was in residential special schools and the least in boarding schools. Nearly three quarters of bullying was by someone of a similar age to the child or young person.

Most common form of bullying was teasing or name-calling, followed by being left out of things, rumours being spread about you, being threatened, being treated unfairly, being hit or physically hurt, being bullied through a mobile or computer, and having property taken or damaged.

Sixteen per cent of those in care said they were bullied for being in care.

Fifty-two per cent thought those looking after children help a lot to stop bullying.

Sixty-three per cent were usually or always asked their opinions on things that matter (this percentage is rising), and 55% said their opinions usually or always made a difference to decisions made about them.

Seventy-one per cent said they were usually or always told about major changes coming in their lives, but 9% that they were never or not usually told.

Thirty-one per cent of children told us they had made a complaint at some time. Sixty-one per cent thought the last complaint they had made had been sorted out fairly (this percentage is rising), but 16% had not been told the outcome of their last complaint.

Sixty-seven per cent of the children who had made a suggestion for change thought their last suggestion was dealt with properly, but 23% had not been told the outcome of their last suggestion.

Fifty-five per cent of children in care knew how to get an advocate, but 30% didn't know what an advocate is.



Eighty-eight per cent rated their education as good or very good, with 81% saying they were doing well or very well in their education.

Ninety-one per cent of children in care rated their care as good or very good. Seventy-one per cent thought that coming into care was right for them at the time, and 72% that being in care was right for them now. Eighty-three per cent thought they were in the right placement for them. Eighty-six per cent of children and young people in care considered that they had been kept safe or very safe from abuse while they had been in care.

Seventy-one per cent thought their last placement change had been in their best interests, but only 21% said there had been any choice of placements the last time they moved. Sixty-nine per cent (a rising proportion) thought that the last time they changed schools because of a change of placements, this had been in their best interests, socially or educationally.

Only fifty-four per cent of children in care had visited their present placement before they moved in, and 41% reported that they had had less than a week's notice that they were going to be moved. Fifty-seven per cent thought they had been given enough information about their present placement before moving in.

Sixty-one per cent of those in care reported that their social worker or other caseworker visited them at least once every six weeks. Sixty-nine per cent of children in care reported that their social worker or other caseworker usually or always spoke to the child alone when visiting to check up on their care, rather than talking to the child in front of their carers or other people.

Seventy-one per cent of children in care thought that their personal information was kept confidential enough.

Twenty-two per cent of children in care said their staff or carers were able to give permission for the same things that parents usually can, without having to go

back to social care services for permission. Fourteen per cent said that they were not allowed to have sleepovers at a friend's house unless their friend's parents had been police-checked first. (It has never been a government requirement that friends' parents have to be police-checked before a child in care can stay overnight with their friends.)

Eighty-one per cent of foster children said their foster carers treated them the same as their own children.

Sixty-four per cent of children in care knew of a designated teacher to support those in care at their school. Fifteen per cent felt they were made to 'stand out' as a child in care at their school or college. Fifty-four per cent said they were helped a lot with their school or college work by their staff or carers at home.

Sixty-six per cent of children in care knew they had a care plan, and of those 75% knew what was in it, 72% agreed with it, and 63% had a say in what it said. Eighty-three per cent said their care plan was being kept to. Sixty-eight per cent thought their current placement would be permanent until they left care.

Seventy-one per cent of children in care who also had a brother or sister in care said they had been separated from one or more of those brothers or sisters by being put in different placements.

Sixty-three per cent of children in care (a rising proportion) knew that they had an Independent Reviewing Officer (an IRO), though 18% didn't know what an IRO was. Seventy-three per cent knew how to get in touch with their IRO. Seventy-one per cent thought their IRO was powerful enough to help them as they should, and 70% thought that their IRO was independent enough. Both these figures have risen since the previous *Monitor*.

Seventeen per cent of children in care reported having an 'independent visitor' (a statutory role).

Eighty-six per cent of children in care rated themselves as healthy or very healthy. Eighty-four per cent of

children in care thought they were getting enough help to stay healthy, and 85% rated the help they got as good or very good. Help for mental health or emotional problems was lower, with 67% saying they had such problems and were getting help with them.

Thirty per cent of children in care thought the Children in Care Council made some or a lot of difference for children in care in their area, but over half (53%) didn't know anything about a Children in Care Council in their area.

Thirteen per cent of children in care, and 25% of care leavers, thought they were being personally affected by budget cuts in their areas.

Twenty-nine per cent of care leavers were not in education, employment or training. Eighty-four per cent had a support social worker or other caseworker, and 74% (a rising proportion) rated the support they were getting as good or very good. Sixty-nine per cent of care leavers reported being in the right accommodation for them, and 77% per cent (a rising proportion) of care leavers rated the standard of their current accommodation as good or very good. Eleven per cent of care leavers (a falling proportion) had moved back to live with their parents after leaving care.

Sixty-two per cent of care leavers knew they had a Pathway Plan, and 73% of those said it was being fully kept to, but six per cent didn't know what a Pathway Plan is.

Twenty-one per cent of care leavers reported being discriminated against for being from care.



**'It is a better life, but where I am now I am not happy and want to move. A boy who is living here bullies me. Sometimes he acts like my dad used to act and I don't like it. He was the reason I went into care'**

# Safeguarding

*Safe from harm*, January 2004

*Younger children's views on Every Child Matters*, August 2005

*Children and safeguarding*, January 2007

*Children's experiences of child protection procedures*, May 2012

In our first report on safeguarding, 110 children gave their key messages on risks, safety and safeguarding.

Those children told us that the main risks of harm came from bullying, illness and accident – and that 18-year-olds are just as much at risk as younger children. Being neglected was a longer-term risk, which might lead to ending up homeless on the streets. Children were clear that harm could come from what they did themselves. Disabled children were particularly aware of risks of accidents, especially in garden and outside areas.

Children aged under 12 listed the main dangers to younger children as: strangers, smoking, accidents with knives, drugs, fire, alcohol, roads, running away, matches, falls, electricity, tools or sharp objects, not being with an adult to keep you safe, and guns or weapons. Their list of what would keep younger children safer was: staying with an adult, staying with members of your family, keeping yourself away from dangerous things and places, not playing with things that are dangerous, not talking to strangers, listening to what adults tell you, having dangerous things locked safely away, keeping close to people you know, and knowing about road safety.

Children told us that what is seen as a risk to children is very much affected by what is being covered in the media at the time – this could be a recent child murder, or a scare about a particular illness, or coverage about risks of bombs and terrorism.

Many saw a balance needing to be struck between protecting children from risks, and being able to live life normally and with the sorts of risks that are an essential bit of life. Sometimes things done to protect people can themselves bring new risks.

In discussing bullying, some told us that many adults don't realise that their adult teasing of children or banter with them can be hurtful and count as bullying. One of the best protections against bullying was a place having an 'atmosphere' where it was just not acceptable to children or staff alike.

Children saw abuse as a general risk faced by all children, but generally felt safe in the way they were being looked after – and knew that staff took good precautions to protect them from 'dodgy people'. There were fewer protections, though, against being abused by other children or young people.

To protect young children, it is important to teach children exactly what the risks of abuse really are – even when they are very young, and even if it scares them.

There should be rules in each place children are looked after about staff touching children, or staff being alone with a child.

Staff training should include how to keep children safe, being taught 'what looking after really means', key skills, having the right attitudes to young people, being good at communicating with children and young people of different ages, first aid and dealing with minor illnesses, keeping personal information confidential, not demanding that every child should tell them every private thing, and accepting things like not having the right as an adult to shout at children if you feel like it. Staff training should be about protecting children, not staff protecting themselves. Finally, staff need to be trained to treat each child as an individual and not as one of hundreds.

Most were in favour of very strong punishment for people who abuse children, though many also saw such people as needing help – there were debates on whether people who abuse children should 'be shot' or 'get counselling'.

In our 2007 report, done to feed children's views into a government review at the time, children told us that the top 10 things that kept children safe were (in order, the most frequently stated first): friends and family, police and the law, teachers and carers, keeping away





from bullies and gangs, using common sense, keeping to safe places, carrying weapons for protection, safety in the home, mobile phones, and avoiding dangers on the Internet.

The top five things children said would make them feel safer were (in order, the most frequently stated first): harsher prison sentences for people who harm children, staying with someone you feel safe with, carrying a weapon to protect yourself, talking with others about dangers, and better policing.

Children differed in whether, if they were being harmed, they would want to tell their story just once to one professional, or to tell it themselves to each professional who needed to know.

Six out of 10 children said the adults working with them made them feel safe. Almost all the others said the adults made no difference to whether they felt safe. Children said they felt less safe with new staff or carers, and with staff or carers who didn't listen to them.

Over half said that adults gave them conflicting advice on how to keep themselves safe from harm.

Our 2012 report was done at the request of Professor Eileen Munro, just after the Munro Review into child protection had made its recommendations, and involved detailed individual discussions with 11 children, aged from nine to 17, about their personal experiences of recent child protection procedures.

We found that it is clearly possible and practicable to ask children for their input to assess the child protection system, without asking for personal details of what had happened to them beforehand and without ourselves getting involved in what was happening in their cases now.

The children had mixed experiences of how well the child protection system was explained to them, and how easily they could ask questions about what was going to happen to them. Many were concerned that

involving social workers meant they were definitely going to be taken away from home into care – and they didn't really know what being in care would be like, apart from what they had seen on TV stories.

The biggest factor for the children in how child protection procedures went was their individual social worker. How comfortable they felt with their social worker, and how much they knew and trusted them, made all the difference. Some hadn't felt able to tell everything they wanted to tell to their social worker because they were still strangers, or were scary people, or in case they took them into care. The social worker's personality and attitude were more important than what rules they were following.

Social workers and people in court needed to work out better ways of making children feel comfortable telling them personal, 'rude' and worrying things.

Few children felt that they had much say in what was happening to them.

'I think it's important that kids have the confidence to speak up. What I've found is that when you do speak up the social worker actually listens'

# Boarding school

*Being a boarder, October 2004*

Quite separately from children in care or getting help from the 'care system', my remit has always included boarding pupils in all types of boarding school – including all the public schools, prep schools, local authority boarding schools and choir schools in England. This report gave the views of boarders about what life is like as a boarder at boarding school. It is based on input from 527 boarders, aged from eight to 19.

Overall, boarders rated boarding schools as looking after children well, and did not identify any single major change needed. Three quarters of boarders rated their school as looking after them well or very well. Only 4% thought their boarding school did not look after them 'well enough'.

Boarding schools were seen as offering a positive social life, with plenty of friends and activities, often across different cultures, and with strong benefits in learning social skills and learning to become independent.

The negative sides of boarding were being separated from home and family, and the continuing need to counter bullying and homesickness. These did not come through as major worries for boarders though. We did ask the parents of boarders for their views, quite separately from asking the boarders, and the boarders themselves reported fewer concerns about being separated from their family, and about homesickness, than their parents did.

Key issues for boarders were:

- Balancing rules and independence at school
- Having their views asked and taken into account
- Knowing about complaints procedures
- Having access to activities when staying at school over the weekends, given the increase of weekly boarding reducing the numbers staying at school at weekends, and local community use of school facilities at weekends.

We asked boarders what they thought their rights as boarders should be – and what they said was very much in line with the National Minimum Standards for Boarding Schools that were in force at the time. Boarders saw privacy as a key right, together with freedom and freedom of speech. They saw respecting others, caring for oneself, respecting school rules and getting on with others as their key responsibilities.

Boarders were clear that boarding does not suit everyone, and that it is vital that the right school is chosen for the individual boarder. For a child suited to boarding, in a boarding school (and a boarding house within that school) that suits them and that responds to the needs of those who do not easily fit in, boarding is reported to be a positive experience.

'Boarders have a lot of freedom and boarding can be fun – but a lot of people miss home'

# Physical restraint

*Children's views on restraint, January 2004*

*Children's views on restraint 2012, December 2012*

Our original report in 2004 gave children's views and experience of the use of physical restraint. We revisited this subject in 2012 to secure updated views and experience.

Children described how something quite minor, or something seen as unfair, could trigger a build-up that escalates into violence and physical restraint. They were clear that staff looking after children need to have the skills to avoid small problems building up to danger level and the need to use restraint. Staff need to handle the initial problem well, be able to 'de-escalate' things, and so only need to use physical restraint rarely and as a last resort. One child described this as needing to get out of 'a revolving circle'.

It is important to be able to calm someone down before they get to the point that restraint is needed – and also to calm them down during physical restraint itself.

Children who had experienced restraint also told us that staff who try restraint when they don't know how to do it properly can make things even more dangerous for everyone.

Those we asked were clear that physical restraint is nevertheless sometimes necessary – but only when someone is genuinely likely to get hurt otherwise, or property is likely to be seriously damaged. Restraint should not be used just because people are 'just messing' or shouting and screaming but not actually likely to hurt anyone or do serious damage to something. The children were very clear that restraint should never be used as a punishment.

Young people do need to know they can be restrained if they are likely to injure themselves or someone else otherwise, or are seriously damaging property.

But staff also need to know that some children do not like an adult touching or holding them tightly because they have been abused in the past.

Staff also need to know that being restrained can make you want to get your own back afterwards – so it is not the end of the story. After restraint, the young person and staff member need to talk about what happened and why. The clear advice from children was that restraint should calm you down – not make you angrier.

Restraint also has an effect on other children who see it happening to someone else. If they laugh at the person being restrained, that in turn can make that person want to get their own back on the others later on.

Children were clear that the use of physical restraint should never cause the child pain. There is also a real risk of injuring a child if restraint is not done properly and in a safe place. Staff need to be trained to use restraint without hurting the child and without making the child get even more out of control. There can also be times when using restraint is dangerous for staff, such as when a child is holding a knife or other weapon.

The key is not restraint itself, but thinking of alternative ways to take the heat out of a developing situation, and knowing the best way to calm each child down. Different children need different ways of calming them down – children recommended that each child's Placement Plan in care should say what is the best way to calm that child down, and the best way to deal with that person if they do lose control and 'kick off'. Using physical restraint on them may well not be the best way to calm them down.

The government quoted our 2004 report in its legal guidance on children's homes (Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 5: Children's Homes). The following conclusions from our report went into the guidance: the importance of all children's homes having strategies in place to avoid the use of restraint; the need for any means of physically intervening with a child to be based on their specific individual personal needs; and the importance of staff being competent to deliver physical intervention in such a way that children are not hurt.

When we rechecked the position at the end of 2012, children still advised that physical restraint can be necessary to prevent injury or serious damage to property, that it is usually better to use other ways to avoid situations reaching that level and to calm someone down, and that restraint can be risky to both the child and (if the child has a weapon) to the staff or others, and is not always the best way to handle a situation. They still advised that staff need to know how to restrain properly if they are going to use restraint, and that restraint should not cause pain or injury.

Children still advised that restraint should therefore usually only be used as a last resort – though there can be emergencies where it should be used straight away to prevent a child from doing something dangerous. If a child is about to jump out of a window, restraining them immediately is likely to be the right thing to do.

The box summarises children’s advice on calming children and young people down before having to use restraint.

- Separate young people from each other.
- Staff should not scream at children.
- Let young people walk away to calm down on their own.
- Understand the different ways to calm each young person down.
- Keep talking calmly, in a calm voice, and try to communicate well.
- Persuade them to calm down.
- Reward good behaviour.
- Talk with the child (perhaps over a cup of tea).
- Send a child to another room for time out.
- Try to solve whatever problems are leading to the need for restraint.
- Disengage from the situation so that it does not escalate.
- Help children to express their feelings in different ways.
- Give children time.
- Use activities to help people calm down.
- Let the child talk to their keyworker or social worker.
- Let a friend try to calm the child down.
- Let the child walk away from the situation.

‘Things build up  
and get out of control’

We heard in our 2012 review that as well as a trigger event or feeling they were being unfairly treated, a child could act in a way that led to restraint because of an emotional state, or because they were under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

Children also told us that one of the best ways of reducing situations that may need the use of restraint was to get each child’s placement right in the first place.





Those we consulted in 2012 most often reported restraint being used when property was being damaged or the child was hitting someone else.

We asked how serious damage to property needed to be to justify restraint – children thought this would be if the damage was deliberate rather than accidental, was damaging property of high value, or if the damage was being repeated rather than being one-off.

**‘I still bear a grudge against the way I was restrained’**

While children in 2012 generally accepted restraint as usable if necessary to prevent injury or serious damage to property, they were clear that it should not be used simply to help staff keep good order and control where there is no risk of injury or serious damage to property. They were also clear that it should not be used to make somebody obey a reasonable instruction they are refusing to obey, and it should not be used as a punishment. Using it as a last resort to prevent or stop injury or serious damage when other ways of calming a situation down have failed is very different from threatening, or using, restraint as a punishment for the way someone is behaving.



# Complaints

*'Getting the best from complaints' – the children's view,*  
February 2005

*Young people's views on complaints and advocacy,*  
December 2012

Our 2005 report was to find children's views of proposals from the then government on changes to the social care children's complaints procedure.

Children found it difficult to understand and use official complaints procedures, and the difference between 'informal' and 'formal' stages of the procedure was confusing. It was important to be able to talk to your social worker about things, but social workers were often difficult to get hold of, were often out of the office, and often didn't return calls. Not being able to get hold of your social worker to discuss something could lead a child to do something drastic. Making a complaint could be a worrying thing to do, and you didn't know what would happen once you had done that. Complaints procedures need to get things sorted out, but often led to reports and 'bits of paper' and often the child didn't get to know what had happened, but saw nothing improving for them, after they had made a complaint.

Children had two major worries about making complaints. Firstly, social workers and people looking into complaints were more likely to agree with staff or adult versions of what had happened than the child's version. Secondly, what you had said would usually be passed straight on to the person you had complained about, which could be dangerous for you if they were your carers. For this reason, foster children told us it is particularly difficult to make any complaints about foster care.

Some felt unable to make complaints about their placements, because they knew their social workers would find it hard to find them another one.

A complaint needs to sort the problem out, not just produce a report. It is important to check up on what it has changed. Complaints should be sorted out as quickly as possible, but it is not right to set standard

timescales for all complaints. Some need longer than others to sort out properly.

Many wanted to be able to talk things over with an adult they trusted before deciding whether or not to make a complaint.

There was general agreement that an independent person should be appointed to check that a complaint was being looked into properly and fairly, to check whether the child was OK with the result at the end, and to make sure any changes that were recommended actually happened. There was general disagreement with making a rule that complaints did not need looking into if they were about something that happened over a year ago – many children might not have been able to make a complaint at the time, if they did not feel confident enough, or if they were still with the same carers so felt unable to complain about them.

Children agreed that children should be able to make positive suggestions as well as complaints, and that social care services should have to respond to a child's suggestions for change, and to tell them if something was going to be changed as a result.

The decider should always go back to the child after any complaint or suggestion, to tell them the results, what had been decided, and why.

Most agreed that a decision should be stopped if the child made a complaint, as long as this would not leave the child in a worse or dangerous situation. It was especially important that if a child complained about being moved from their placement, they should not

**'After the complaint  
has been investigated it  
might be too late, you  
might already have been  
moved'**

be moved until that complaint had been sorted out, as long as they were safe where they were.

Another 118 children gave their views on complaints and advocacy in 2012. In summary, they defined a complaint as showing dissatisfaction with something or trying to improve something. It could be about something specific, services or surroundings, about not being able to get something you want or need, or could be about a person rather than something particular that has happened.

For those in care, the most frequent complaints were about a social worker. Complaints about other children or young people, or about staff looking after children, came next.

Some children were concerned that once you had made a complaint, you lost control of what happened next, and the results could be very different from what you expected. It could result in something unfair happening, or could backfire on the person who had complained (especially if it revealed that they had been doing something wrong, or had been somewhere they shouldn't have been, at the time).

Sometimes nothing happens with a complaint until it has been moved on up the procedure, and it is usually best to try to get things sorted out informally if you can without making a formal complaint. We heard that sometimes you have to make a problem get worse before a complaint about it will be taken seriously. And some children will do something drastic – like running away – if a complaint doesn't sort a problem out for them.

**'You make a complaint once and nothing happens, so you don't make another one'**

Having an adult making a complaint for a child can help it to be taken seriously, and some children are not able to complain for themselves. Professionals always listen more to adults than to children. However, many children in 2012 did not know whether or not an adult had made a complaint on their behalf, and one in four of those who knew they had, did not agree with the complaint the adult had made for them. Adults complaining on behalf of children often got the facts wrong, and often passed on things the child had not wanted them to pass on. Any adult thinking of complaining on behalf of a child, or about something that has happened to a child, should check with that child first.

Well over half the children in 2012 who had made a complaint told us their last complaint had been totally or partly agreed with – nearly a third said it had been totally agreed with. Only one in six children said their last complaint had been completely rejected. Just over a third said their last complaint had been dealt with very fairly or quite fairly, but one in five said it had been dealt with very unfairly or quite unfairly.

Children wanted to discuss their concerns before making a complaint. Overall, the most likely person to discuss them with was another child or young person. For those in care, the most likely adult to discuss concerns with was the child's social worker.

Just over a third said that their last complaint had made things either a bit better or much better for them. But on the other hand, over a quarter said that it had made things either a bit worse or much worse for them. The rest said it hadn't made any difference.

Making a complaint was likely to make a difference, but was only slightly more likely to make things better than worse. Making a proposal for change was slightly more effective than making a complaint in producing a wanted change.



# Inspection

*The children's view of inspection*, March 2005

*Does inspection make a difference?*, October 2005

*Sorting out inspection*, November 2005

*A pilot for a children's audit of inspection*, 2008

*Social care inspection: the children's audit*, September 2011

These reports give children's views about the inspection of children's social care and welfare in residential education, and their assessments of how accurate and effective inspection is. They relate to inspections by the statutory inspectorate of children's social care of the day – first the Commission for Social Care Inspection, and then Ofsted.

In 2005 we heard that most children were told beforehand when an inspection was going to happen. They thought they had been given enough notice before the inspectors arrived. Sometimes, especially in children's homes, the children already knew the inspector from previous visits.

Children told us that most homes and schools get things ready for inspections, and that when inspectors visit, things are different from usual. Staff act differently and things get 'camouflaged'. There should be unannounced 'sudden inspections', and inspectors should always ask children how the home or school has been made different for their inspection.

Inspections should always make things change if inspectors think they need to change. Children did not think inspections usually led to changes happening. However, sometimes things did change for the better when staff knew inspectors were coming and so prepared things for the inspection. Inspectors do need to get something done about individual problems children tell them about during inspections.

Children were often uncertain what they were supposed to say to inspectors – whether they were supposed to be telling inspectors about problems, or trying to help

their staff to make sure that their home or school got a good inspection report.

For most children, the only way they were given to tell inspectors what they thought was to fill in a questionnaire. These questionnaires often did not ask about things that really mattered to children, and didn't give them a chance to raise things they wanted to raise. Many would prefer to speak to an inspector, though some did not find it easy to think of what they should say if they happened to meet an inspector during their visit.

Most inspectors were good at listening to children, which is vital. Inspectors differed in how good they were at avoiding misinterpreting what children said. Inspectors need to be careful not to give their own views on things rather than listen to the children's views, and not to ask children too many private personal questions instead of questions about how well they are being looked after. Inspectors should always ask a child's permission before reading their personal files. Some inspectors need to be less interested in buildings. Inspectors always need to be neutral, finding out about things without coming to their own ideas first.

One problem was that inspectors were not always good at keeping what children say confidential enough. They needed to be very careful not to tell staff what children had said, or to give information that let staff work out which child had said something to the inspectors, as this could have bad consequences for children after the inspectors had gone. Children were afraid that inspectors would simply tell staff what they had said about them, and staff would find it very easy to identify which child had said what to the inspectors.

It would be good to offer children a choice of ways to give their views to inspectors, and to make sure that if a child was away when inspectors visited, they did not lose their chance to have their say. Talking to inspectors should always be voluntary.

Staff are usually keener and easier for inspectors to talk to than children, so inspectors need to make sure they do talk enough with children. They should spend more time with people and less with paperwork, and should ask children for their views and be shown around by children before they talk with staff.

Inspectors could improve inspections by visiting more often, explaining to children exactly what they are looking for and spending more time with children. They should check back with children on their findings, make unannounced visits, and do follow-up visits to make sure that changes they recommended did happen, and that their inspections did improve things children said needed improving ('do something and show results').

Half the children we spoke to in 2005 thought inspectors were doing well. In *Does inspection make a difference?* we checked directly with children what had happened after 40 different inspections of how they were looked after in homes, residential schools and foster care.

The children thought that overall inspections do make a difference for children, and that of the things inspectors say need to improve, more do improve than get worse. Over four out of 10 of the children said that just having an inspection had improved their lives in their home, school or fostering service.

Just under three quarters agreed with the inspectors' recommendations. Just over half said that at least one thing the inspector recommended should change had in fact then changed for the better. But just under a quarter said that something the inspectors had said should improve had actually then got worse. Sometimes the way a home, school or service had tried to change things had actually ended up making things worse for the children in ways that hadn't been expected, and inspectors need to know this can happen.

In *Sorting out inspection*, we reported children's views on government proposals to have a single inspectorate for both education and social care – which Ofsted eventually became.

The government had proposed that inspectors should check up less often if things have been going well in the past, and more often if they already know there are problems. This is sometimes called 'proportionality'. Most children and young people wanted inspectors to check up just as often whether they knew there were problems or knew things had been going well in the past.

They gave three reasons for this. First, places can change (especially with staff changes); second, inspectors coming regularly may be something that keeps a place going well; and third, inspectors may wrongly believe a place is good, perhaps because they are taken in by how it is changed in preparation for their visits – 'a place may know the inspector is coming and look good for when they come. If the inspections are frequent the truth about the place will slip out.'

In short, children wanted extra visiting from inspectors where there were known problems, but the same level of inspection as always, with no reductions, where things seemed to be going well.

In 2008 we tried out a new way of checking what children thought of inspections – a 'children's audit' of inspection. After 10 Ofsted inspections of care in children's homes, boarding schools and residential colleges, we asked children at those establishments for their assessment of how well the place measured up to the list of National Minimum Standards, and compared

'You can tell when the inspectors are coming, 'cause they make me tidy my room'

that with what inspectors had reported, and with what the managers of those places had said about their services. In this study, children did not report much preparation for inspections at their homes or schools, other than the staff picking the children who would show the inspectors around and explain things to them.

Overall, inspectors and managers agreed with each other more than they did with children. Inspectors agreed with just over a third of what children said about the home or school, and children agreed with just over a quarter of what inspectors said. Disagreements between children and inspectors were usually either because they simply disagreed over whether or not something was OK, or because the establishment was doing something positive but children reported that it wasn't actually working out so well for them in practice.

Overall, children were less positive about the homes and schools than inspectors were. Children made most positive comments about good relationships with staff, being listened to and good activities, while inspectors made most positive comments about activities for children, countering bullying, helping individual children and good relationships between staff and children.

Finally, in 2011 we surveyed 224 children about their recent experiences of Ofsted inspections of their children's homes, boarding schools or residential special schools. Twenty-one per cent did not know their establishment had been inspected until they got our questionnaire asking about it. Seventy-eight per cent of those who did know said they had been told about the

inspection before it happened. Twenty-six per cent said they had been told to prepare things for the inspectors, mainly by tidying up (though four children said they had been told to tell the inspectors good things about the place).

Just under three quarters had spoken to an inspector, around half had taken part in a group discussion with an inspector, and just over half had filled in a questionnaire for inspectors. Overall, three quarters felt they had been able to get their views across to the inspectors, eight out of 10 rated the inspectors as good at listening to children, and six out of 10 thought they took children's views as seriously as the views they were given by adults. Half the children thought the inspectors had succeeded in finding out what it was like for children living at their place.

Just under a quarter of the children reported that something had changed quickly as a result of the inspection.

Key points made for future inspections were that inspectors should give every child the chance to give their views, and should especially observe staff/child relationships.

**'Find out what's important to the children, then concentrate on those things during the inspection'**



# Being fostered

*Being fostered*, June 2005

*Children's views on fostering*, December 2012

Our 2005 report gave the views of 410 foster children on what it was like being fostered.

A third of the foster children said they had not been told enough about their current foster family before they moved in to live with them. They wanted more information about their future carers, and about any other children living in the household. Two thirds said they'd had no choice about which foster home they would be placed in. Just over three quarters said their views now made a difference to how they were looked after in their foster homes. Almost all said their foster carers treated them much the same as they did their own children.

The best things about being fostered were the care and support you had, the opportunities it gave you, liking your foster family, and living in a family rather than another sort of placement. Good fostering changed your life by making you feel well looked after and safer, helping you to do well at school, and helping you become more independent. The best foster carers were friendly, kind, cheerful, fun, caring and easy to talk to.

The worst things about being fostered were missing your birth family, missing your past friends, the rules and punishments in your foster home, and feeling that you were the 'odd one out' in the family because you were in care. A third of children said there was 'nothing' they could say was a worst aspect of being fostered.

Four out of 10 took part in sports. Six out of 10 would like to spend more time on their hobbies or leisure interests. Coming into foster care had made one in 10 have to give up a sport or activity they used to do.

One in 10 foster children met regularly with other foster children to discuss being fostered. Another one in seven would like to do this.

The best types of support foster children had received from their social workers were giving them general support, finding their foster home and arranging contacts with their birth families. They wanted social workers to help more with personal problems and with keeping in touch with their birth families, to visit them more often – and not to change so often.

One in eight said that as foster children they felt 'different' at school. Nearly a quarter of those in this survey had been bullied for being foster children. Almost all the children could name someone they would be able to go to if they had personal problems or worries. Foster children's main worry was about what support they would get after they left care.

The one change that would make fostering better in the future would be social workers getting placements right first time. Almost half said there was nothing they thought should change in the future to make fostering safer. The changes that were suggested included getting placements right first time, more contact with social workers, and sorting out contacts with birth families.

Children who had experienced life in both children's homes and foster homes said that the best thing about a children's home was that you were with other children going through the same things as you, while the best thing about a foster home was that you got more individual attention.

In 2012, we consulted 363 foster children at the time of government proposals for changes in fostering. Forty per cent said there was nothing they would change about fostering. There was no one change which more than one in 10 children proposed; there was no major change that foster children generally were calling for.

Many foster children we consulted in 2012 thought that foster children were given less freedom than children living with their own parents, and should be allowed more freedom as they grew older.



The government intended to increase the decisions that foster carers could make for their foster children, to match what any parent could decide (unless the child's care plan said otherwise for a good reason). The children in this consultation generally supported this. They said they had definite problems with foster carers not being allowed to decide things or give permissions for foster children that parents were able to decide for other children. Only 26% of the children reported that there was nothing they had been prevented from doing because their foster carers were not allowed to give permission for it as other parents could.

The commonest example of foster carers having to get someone else's permission rather than being allowed to decide yes or no for themselves was giving children permission to stay overnight with friends, which many foster children were not allowed to do unless social care services had run police checks on their friends' parents (which has never been a government requirement). After overnight stays came going on holiday, seeing their own relatives, and going on trips such as school trips. Permission usually got complicated if the child wanted to do certain types of sport at school or at a sports club – including boxing, go-karting and, for some, football.

One in 20 said that their foster carers had to check before allowing them to have a particular style of haircut, and could not say yes or no as parents could. The children thought that having a haircut was

something no foster carer should need to get someone else's permission to allow them to do.

The one area that many children thought foster carers should perhaps still have to get permission for, which applied to foster children but not children living with their own parents, was allowing a foster child to see relatives from their birth families.

Overall, foster children in 2012 thought that foster carers should be allowed to give permission for anything that other children's parents could give permission for. Anything they needed to get someone else's agreement to should be set out at the time the child was placed, rather than putting things on hold when the issues came up.

Many told us that allowing something and refusing permission for something are two very different things. This applies especially to things like family contact, where a foster carer should not be able to refuse a child contact with their birth family without this being part of the child's care plan.

Where permission might still be needed, such as agreeing to contact with the child's birth family, foster carers should be able to get a decision from social care services quickly. We heard that it can take a long time to get a decision out of a social worker on something that is not a social care emergency, even if it is important to the child.

'Children should be told everything about the carers before they move in'

'They need to get the match right – if it's not the right placement, it stresses them and us out'

Children thought that there might be some things that social care services would reasonably still want foster carers to check with them before agreeing. Apart from contact with birth relatives, these included going on a holiday out of the country, and having major medical treatment. The foster children also thought that there are some decisions that their birth parents should be asked about. These included decisions about things like faith and religion. Generally, the children preferred important decisions for them to be made by their foster carers or birth parents, rather than by their social workers. As the child grows older, their own say should also become more decisive in decisions about them and what they can do.

Some schools make things more of a problem by not accepting a foster carer's signature giving the child permission to do something at school, or go on a school trip, but insisting on having a social worker's signature.

Children need to be given information on the various 'house rules' in their new foster household, as what is and isn't acceptable is very different in different families, and getting this wrong or not learning the rules quickly enough can damage a new placement. These could include things like rules about taking food from the fridge, or whether you were allowed to flush the toilet at night.

In 2012 children told us that the main reasons for past foster placements ending were, in order of frequency, that it was a short-term placement, the child and foster carers had not got on, the child disliked the placement, the child's own behaviour, returning to birth parents, and the carers turning out unsuitable for the child. Just over a third of these children's past placements had ended for planned reasons. Unplanned ending could be reduced by children and foster carers talking things through, children improving problem behaviour, good support for the foster family, getting the right placement in the first place, and social care services doing more visits to keep checking that the child was settling well.

Settling well into a new foster home worked best when the child and carers were given plenty of information about each other, and got to know each other through visits and a trial period first, when the child took their own possessions with them, and when the placement was calm and welcoming, the move was gradual rather than sudden, and there was a good sense of humour.

The children agreed with the idea of permanent foster placements where possible, as long as things were going well – but permanence is not always the right thing. Sometimes it is right for a child to move on.

'Knowing whether you can flush the toilet at night'

# Younger children's views on 'Every Child Matters'

*Younger children's views on Every Child Matters, October 2005*

In 2005 we took views from 505 children aged under 12 at our national children's conference about the then government's 'Every Child Matters' proposals. These eventually became the national policy, focusing on children being healthy, being safe, enjoying life and achieving in their learning, helping others and making a positive contribution, and having enough money for their economic well-being.

Nearly all the children agreed those five things were important to children. The one scoring highest for importance was staying safe. This was followed by being healthy, enjoying life and learning, and helping others. Having enough money scored as least important. (Some said this was because having money is not so important when you are very young, others said there are more important things in life than money.)

However, children listed a number of other things that they thought should be added to the list of what is important to children. Here is their own list (we made no suggestions):

- Family
- Friends
- Enough food and drink
- Fun
- Love
- Respect
- Being happy

As well as listing dangers to younger children and what would keep younger children safe, which we have listed above in the 'Safeguarding' section of this digest, children under 12 told us about their exercise and diet. The types of exercise they did most frequently were, in order, running, swimming, football, cycling and walking. The types of exercise they most enjoyed doing were, in order, swimming, football, running, dancing and cycling.

The healthiest foods they ate were, again in order, fruit, vegetables and salad – the most usual healthy vegetable was carrots, and the most usual healthy fruits were apples and then bananas. The unhealthy foods they ate were, in order, chips, sweets, chocolate, burgers, crisps and pizza.

The most popular spare time activities were, in order, computer games, playing, football, TV, swimming, being with friends, doing sports, reading and listening to music. The top three things the children wanted to do more were going for trips and holidays, visiting theme parks, and swimming.

On enjoying life, learning and achieving, these were the top reasons children gave for going to school: to learn, to get an education, to get a job in the future and to make friends.

On making a contribution or helping others, the children listed how they should be towards other people, rather than jobs or things they might do. Here is the list of ways the children thought they could help others at their age: being kind to others, doing things to help, talking to others, being nice, being friendly, looking after others, playing well with each other, and finally doing washing up or jobs.

Finally, on money, we asked how much pocket money they were given in 2005, and what they spent it on. The amount increased with age, from an average of £2.89 a week at age five, to £3.90 at age nine and £4.43 at the age of 12. How much you could spend and what you could spend it on depended on three main things. These were whether you could earn more by things like doing extra jobs at home, what your parents or carers bought for you and what they left you to buy for yourself, and what rules there were about how much money you had to save up rather than spend straight away. Where children had to save some of their pocket money, they usually had to save about half of what they got.

Overall, the most usual things to spend pocket money on were, in order: sweets, toys, savings, magazines and comics, games, clothes, presents for other people and CDs. The amount of pocket money saved rather than spent straight away goes up until age seven, then drops to its lowest at the age of nine, before rising steadily again to its highest at 12.

# Being a young carer

*Being a young carer*, January 2006

This report gave the views of young carers at a consultation workshop.

A major task for young carers was giving emotional support and company, along with practical tasks like 24-hour personal support, toileting, washing and putting someone to bed. Many were the main back-up person to a main adult carer. Other frequent tasks were doing jobs around the house that an adult they were caring for couldn't do, looking after other children in the family and doing the family shopping. They might be responsible for taking the person they were caring for out and about and pushing them in a wheelchair. Young carers also had to look after themselves more than other children and young people of their age, because the adults at home were less able to do things for them.

A key task was giving medication. Many were very worried about the responsibility of this, and of having to get complicated medication right, often involving giving dozens of tablets with different dosages at different times. Doctors did not usually give young carers any advice about giving medicines to the adult they were caring for, nor about any warning signs they needed to look out for. Young carers responsible for giving out medication wanted to be told fully how to give that medication safely. They also needed training about the best ways of caring, including practical things like lifting someone, first aid, travelling with a disabled person, and about the disability or illness of the person they were caring for. Young carers could be injured by lifting a disabled adult in the wrong way. Many told us they were worried for the person they cared for that they might be getting the caring wrong.

Being a young carer meant much more work and responsibility than most children and young people your age have. You could miss out on your own childhood and social life as a young person, and could suffer from emotional and stress problems yourself.

Your school work might well be affected. Young carers have to grow up and take responsibilities fast – and some carers are still at primary school.

Although young carers didn't report being bullied for being young carers, they said that almost as bad was having to put up with other people's comments, reactions and prejudices – when seeing a child pushing an adult in a wheelchair, or about a disabled or mentally ill adult. It would be helpful if schools did more to promote basic politeness towards disabled and ill people – and those caring for them. Other children could make nasty comments about your disabled or ill family member – and it was also difficult to cope with staff at school frequently asking you questions about things at home.

You often got into difficulties over handing in coursework late or being tired at school after being up at night coping with caring tasks. Sometimes peaks of caring work and peaks of school work coincided, and teachers differed in whether or not they were prepared to make any allowances for what you had to do at home as a carer. Schools often did not understand that you might need to phone home during the school day to check whether a crisis had happened at home, and which you might have to deal with.

Many young carers didn't feel they were helped by social care services, who didn't usually offer help, advice, equipment or support to the young carer,

**'Because we can cope day to day they say we can manage – but we need help as well'**

but concentrated instead on doing an assessment of how well things were for the adult being cared for. Professionals tended to conclude that all was well if the young carer seemed to be coping. This led to the young carer being taken for granted rather than supported. Our workshop group advised that if any assessment found that a young carer was involved, then it should include identifying and giving any help or support that young carer needed to help them care. It was not helpful when social care services started looking into whether a young carer might need to be taken into care because their parent had difficulties, rather than seeing the need as helping the young carer to cope.

Some young carers felt they needed respite care for themselves, as well as better access to the services that are there to help adult carers. Being children, they were often not able to get services available to adult carers. Very often, things might be all right for some time until something went wrong, and then the young carer would need someone to fall back on – for their own sake and for the person or people they were caring for.

Those in the workshop did not want new forms of support, just guidance and support in what they were already doing, equipment and benefits available to adult carers, and the ability to have some regular enjoyable time out with other young carers – that is, more of what young carers' groups already provide. Back-up support for young carers needs to be available all the time, as the demands and pressures of caring are often very unpredictable and you need help when you need it, not when it is timetabled to be available. This is important if a school does provide someone to talk to about caring and school pressures. Your needs and the support the school may plan are often not in phase. A regular phone call from a supporter to check all is well would be valuable.

Generally, young carers accepted their roles as carers, but wanted more training, advice, and support in doing their caring tasks, and more understanding among people generally and at school in particular of the realities of being a young carer.



'They can miss out on so much and have to grow up so fast'



# Sharing information

*Passing it on, June 2006*

We consulted children on government proposals in 2006 for new guidance on sharing children's confidential information.

From what the children said, it is only OK to pass on information about a child if doing so will benefit that child, or if it will prevent serious harm to them or another person. Before passing the information on, the professional concerned should be clear what the benefit to the child is, or how serious is the harm they are trying to prevent. They also need to assess whether on balance they believe that passing the information on will actually result in the benefit, or prevent the harm. They also need to take into account whether passing on the information might itself risk harm to the child.

Anyone passing on information to benefit a child or prevent serious harm must always be sure of their facts. The information they pass on must be right, and they must avoid passing on rumours or assumptions.

Children were clear that professionals such as teachers and social workers should only be given information they need to know about a child to be able to do their job with that child. They are not entitled to know more than this.

The children we consulted agreed that information should be passed on if on balance it is likely to prevent a crime that is serious enough to cause injury to someone.

There should be punishments for professionals who pass on information wrongly about a child or young person.

If a child understands enough, their permission should always be sought before passing on information about them, the only exception to this being if the information has to be passed on to prevent serious harm to that child or someone else. Even if information has to be passed on for that reason without the child's permission, the child should be told their information has to be passed on, and what is going to be done with

it. The child's permission should be sought again if the information is being passed on again in the future to someone else.

The children advised that professionals should assess whether a child understands enough to be able to give or refuse permission to pass on information, and whether a child is able to give permission is about the child's understanding, not just their age. Where a child doesn't understand enough to give their own permission, a parent's permission should not be accepted instead if that parent is not the child's current carer.

If a child is too young, or doesn't understand enough, to make a decision for themselves, they may still have important views or worries about the issue. If possible, they should be asked for their views and concerns, and those should still be taken into account.

Children differed over whether they would want to talk about something very difficult, like being abused, to just one professional who would then pass it on to other people who needed to know about it, or whether they would prefer to be asked to repeat themselves to different professionals who needed to know. Some only wanted to have to talk about things once, but others preferred to give their own information themselves to each professional who needed to know, to make sure it was right and said in the way they wanted, rather than just leaving it to the first person they told to tell all the others. They agreed the child should be asked whether they wanted the first professional they told to pass the information on for them, or whether they wanted to tell each professional for themselves.

It is important that professionals do not discuss a child's personal information, or chat about a child, in front of other people, including other children. If they receive information about a child from someone else, then they are responsible for keeping that information very safely, and only using it for proper purposes.



# Leaving care

*Young people's views on leaving care, February 2006*

*After care, March 2012*

The best things about leaving care were getting your own place to live, and being responsible for yourself without anyone else telling you what to do or having to get permission to do things. If you were going back home, this was good, and if you weren't, you could choose for yourself whether and how you saw your birth family again.

The worrying things about leaving care, though, were loneliness, finding you could not cope on your own after all, and not being able to get help when you needed it. You could find you didn't have enough money. You could have been placed to live in a 'dodgy' place, find it hard to settle, and be worried about becoming homeless. Some felt they had been left to go back to live with people who had been considered unsuitable when they had come into care in the first place. You might have been made to leave care before you were ready to leave. The young person needed more choice and say in when they were going to leave care.

We heard in 2006 that some had left care with very little notice, and preparation for leaving care varied a lot. Over half the care leavers we consulted said they had not been given any practical help in getting work, benefits or training, and only just over half had been given practical help over carrying on education and getting suitable accommodation. Some found getting work particularly difficult, as they found they were discriminated against because they had been in care. A third said they had not been prepared enough to handle their own money. Training was needed in everyday practical things like shopping, cooking and cleaning.

How much planning there was for leaving care and support after that – through 'pathway plans' – also varied widely. Six out of 10 said they had a plan, and over half were happy with their plan and had been given a say in it. Planning and preparation needed to start in detail about a year before leaving care. Support from leaving care workers was something else that varied widely. Some were excellent, others unhelpful, and it depended on who your leaving care worker was. The amount of money given to support care leavers was something else that varied a lot, depending on where you lived. Care leavers thought there should be a standard amount of money given to care leavers wherever you were in the country, and whichever council had been looking after you.

Improvements put forward by the care leavers we consulted would be to leave care when the young person felt ready, more gradually rather than suddenly, with more preparation and being able to go back for more care and support if you needed to. There needed to be more money for living after care, more training and help in getting benefits you were entitled to, and help in getting travel passes and driving lessons to get around. Social care services needed to do more checks on the accommodation they were moving care leavers into, and give guarantees so the care leaver could be secure in where they lived. Some care leavers need a great deal of support to care for babies of their own.

**'I was scared as I was completely on my own, but I'm getting used to it now'**



In 2012 we reported the views and experiences of 308 care leavers. The main positives about their time in care had been the support they received, and the chance to be part of a family. The main negatives had been missing your birth family, rules and restrictions, and too many moves while in care. Again, care leavers spoke of the loneliness and emotional stress of living on your own after the support of being in care, and the need for care leavers to have much more preparation for the emotional side of leaving care and living on your own. Along with this, care leavers needed more information about their rights and entitlements, especially regarding money.

Six out of 10 care leavers asked thought their time in care had made things better for them than they would have been otherwise, though just over a quarter thought being in care had made things worse. Over four in 10 care leavers asked said their lives had become better or much better since leaving care than they had been when in care. Just over a third said their lives as care leavers were worse. Many who felt their lives had improved spoke of having developed more confidence and independence. The main best thing about life after care was having more freedom; the worst things were loneliness and not getting enough support. Some felt they had grown further apart from their families since leaving care.

Just under a third of the care leavers thought that coming into care had led to them doing better in education than they would have done otherwise.

**'You have many opportunities to get leaving care right – we only get one!'**

Just under a quarter of those asked thought they had been well or very well prepared for independent life after care. Almost half thought they had been badly or very badly prepared. Where they had been well prepared, they had been taught how to budget, given everyday domestic skills such as washing, cleaning and cooking, and had been prepared to cope with independent living. Generally, care leavers needed more help with money matters, practical independence skills, getting important personal documents they would need such as passports, national insurance details and birth certificates – and to have someone to talk to and contact for advice.

Just over half we asked said the advice their local authorities had given them for life after care had been useful, but a quarter said they had not found it useful in practice, and one in five said they had not been given advice for life after care. Twenty-nine per cent were given enough, or nearly enough, financial help with daily living expenses, 23% that they were not given enough, and 19% that their councils did not help them with daily living costs. Over half had been given financial help with their education or training after leaving care.

Out of those asked, four out of 10 had wanted to leave care at the time they did leave – and another four out of 10 had not wanted to leave when they did. Only a quarter thought that, looking back, they had left care at the right time. Forty-six per cent thought they had left care too early, and only 17% that they should have left care earlier.

A third of our care leavers, aged between 18 and 23, had stayed in the same accommodation since leaving care. Another third had moved once or twice, and one in five had moved five or more times.

Looking back at their experience of care, 39% thought the care system had improved during their time in it, and 28% that it had got worse.

Being from care did carry a stigma. Half the care leavers asked told us that they sometimes, often or always tried to keep it a secret that they had been in care.



# Private fostering

*Private fostering, May 2005*

*Children's experience of private fostering, September 2008*

In 2005 we consulted privately fostered children on proposals by the then government to improve the welfare checks made for privately fostered children.

The children told us that a privately fostered child would not usually know whether their parents or carers had told social care services they were being fostered. People generally needed to be told more about what they should do if they were going to take in a privately fostered child, with information leaflets and contact email addresses. Teachers should look out for privately fostered children moving into the school and tell the carers they needed to contact social care services.

The children themselves needed to be given information about private fostering, about the carers they were going to move in with, and about who to contact if they were worried or if things were going wrong. Private foster carers needed to be given information they needed about children before they moved in. The children we consulted thought that children themselves should have more say about becoming private foster children.

Social workers should definitely visit privately fostered children to check that they are safe. Social workers should then do a full risk assessment for the child. They should always speak to the child where the child could talk freely, away from their carers. This could be at the social worker's office, at school, or by telephone. They needed to know that children will try not to offend the people they are living with.

Children proposed that every privately fostered child should be given the number of a social worker they can contact if they have any concerns. So should private foster parents. Social workers should visit privately fostered children regularly, all privately fostered children should be able to ask them to make an extra visit, and they should always visit if asked to by a child.

The second report followed up our 2005 report to check children's experience since the implementation of new Regulations and National Minimum Standards on private fostering. It gave the views of 59 privately fostered children.

In 2008, almost all the children thought private fostering was right for them. Private fostering arrangements were usually made by the child's birth parents, and over three quarters said they had a say in the choice of their private foster carers. Over three quarters knew their private carers before they moved in; one in five did not.

Most would want a trial stay with possible private carers before the arrangement was agreed. Over three quarters had been given enough information about their future carers before they moved in.

Some children told us that local council children's services had arranged their private fostering placements. However, councils cannot legally make private fostering arrangements.

Most of the children said they had a say in everyday decisions in their private foster families.

Children were concerned that they might need a different placement if they needed to move away from their private placement. One in five said they were getting fewer social worker visits than the law says they should. Social workers usually saw children in their private carer's home, and most children were able to speak to their visiting social worker alone. How often social workers spoke to the child alone still varied from every visit to not at all.

Children thought there should be more information telling parents and carers that they must tell social care services about children being fostered privately. They thought privately fostered children should get more support, especially with school issues. They wanted their social workers to keep checking that they were all right, by regularly phoning them, always talking directly to them, checking with their schools and making 'surprise' visits to their private foster homes.

# Running away – and coming back

*Running away*, May 2006

*Running away 2012*, October 2012

In 2006 we reported children's experiences when running away from their placements.

Children ran for many individual reasons, but there were three main reasons. First, running away to enjoy yourself before coming back; second, running to somewhere or someone the child wanted to go to (often family or friends); and third, to run from things they couldn't cope with where they were living.

Children said that running when staff or carers knew where you would be going was very different, and much safer, than running to get away from where you were, often without a clear idea of where you were going to.

Just being a teenager late home, or going somewhere without permission or where you had been told not to go is not running away, though some said this had been counted by staff as running away.

Children told us that while they are away they may steal to get food and money, but they also feel in real danger from members of the public. Some told us how they had been abused, been the subject of violence, or got involved in prostitution once they had run away. Some told us they knew of children who had run away and never come back: they could guess what had happened to them, from their own experiences.

While they were away, many told us they went around in groups or carried weapons to protect themselves from other people. Many told us that you come back when you are cold and hungry. Most said that running away from problems doesn't solve them.

Children are less likely to run away if they have good staff, who organise activities, counter bullying, listen to young people and help with problems and pressures. They said that if they have run away, that should not become the main thing professionals tell each other about them.

When they return, children want to be able to talk to someone completely independent of the place they have run from, when they feel ready. If they run away because of problems, or to be somewhere else or with someone else, rather than just for fun, they want those problems or issues to be resolved. If found by police, they want the police to find them someone to talk things through with independently, not just return them to the place they came from.

In 2012, we consulted again about running away, speaking to 98 children and young people over 10 separate discussion groups.

Again we heard that children may run from a placement or problems they cannot cope with, or to go to a place where they want to be or a person they want to be with. They could end up in many different places, including on the street. As in 2006 we heard that some young people just run to have fun and then come back, and that sometimes a young person can be classified as having run away if they simply stayed out late.

Children told us they had run away from somewhere they cannot cope for many reasons, including problems with relationships, wanting to change placements, or wanting to escape from stress and take time out to think things through and calm down.

Those we consulted told us that children who have run once are likely to run again, especially if the problems they ran away from are still there.

We heard more in 2012 about the dangers of running away. When they have run away from somewhere, children are in danger – of committing crime to survive, of becoming involved in gangs, of drug or alcohol abuse, of injury through accident, and of being sexually exploited or trafficked. Some realise the dangers, but others don't. Realising the dangers puts some off running away but for many the pressure to run overrides the worry about danger.



In the experience of those we consulted, running feels good and exciting at first, but soon becomes boring and frightening. Children who have run feel worried for their safety, about how they will survive alone, and about what will happen to them when they get back. Most children and young people intend to come back once they have had fun, or had time to calm down, unless they have run to somewhere or someone and want to stay there. Few just run and intend never to return.

Developing what had been said in 2006, we again heard that the best way to prevent children and young people from running away from a placement where they can't cope is for staff to ask about and listen to their problems and try to solve them (even if it means a change of placement) before the child feels the need to run away. And to prevent the child running again once they come back, staff should ask about and try to solve any problems that caused them to run. It would also help prevent some children from running if staff made sure that all children and young people really understood the dangers that children face if they run away.

Staff cannot directly keep children safe once they have run away, but can help them keep themselves safe by making sure they know about what help they can call upon, and that they have charged mobile phones to call or text staff if they want to.

Many children believe that the people closest to them will worry the most about them when they run away, but that most professionals are only concerned because it is part of their job and are not really worried about the individual child.

Running doesn't solve problems – staff need to do that when children return.

**'Risks and dangers are endless – there are some risky people out there'**

# Residential family centres

*Young people's views on residential family centres, June 2006*

Residential family centres accommodate parents with their children, to assess and support the parents' care of their children. This report gave the views of (mainly young and often teenage) parents on life in residential family centres.

Parents overall strongly appreciated centre staff advising them on how to care for their children, but worried about the future as so much depended on the centre's assessment of them.

Centres varied widely in the amount and nature of staff monitoring, the rules to be followed, and the scope parents had to make their own parenting choices.

Life in a centre lacked privacy, with staff supervision and monitoring, and in some cases use of CCTV. Some disliked the group work with other parents in some centres over private personal and family matters.

Some were concerned that not all staff had experience of being parents. Centres tended to have fixed ideas about parenting and baby care, and needed to be more flexible in what was expected of young parents, both in their choices about how to care for their child, and in the rules that applied to themselves. Many wished for more scope to make decisions and choices about their children for themselves.

**'They watch and then if we're not doing it right, tell us'**



Younger parents thought some centres focused so much on how they parented their children that their own social and personal support needs as young people were not met. Moving to a centre had often cut them off from family and friends.

Most wanted more parenting assessment in their local communities without moving into a centre: leaving the community and losing jobs made it more difficult to get support or work again after returning from the residential centre. Some suggested an alternative would be more local residential centres.

Parents thought centres should have less sharing of bathrooms between families, and a room where resident parents can socialise. They said residence, contact and visiting by fathers needs to be considered more.

Few parents had seen a care plan for themselves and their children. Young parents wanted more clarity about how long they would be spending in the centre, clearer plans for support when they left, more reviewing and information on their progress, and more scope and support to make individual parenting choices.



# Social workers

*About social workers, July 2006*

We asked children what they thought about social workers. Overall, children rated their social workers at eight out of 10, and next after foster carers, home or school staff and birth parents as the most helpful people in children's lives. The individual social worker is much more important than the star rating of the council.

A good social worker is easy to get hold of and takes action for children. They will keep in touch, by phone if necessary, help with problems early and take action before a crisis develops. They will focus on the individual child and their concerns, and not automatically believe carers, parents or other professionals over the child. They will not allow children in care to miss out on things like staying overnight with friends or getting permission or funding for activities. They will do what they promise to do, and will keep pushing for the child.

Good social workers are good at listening to children, discuss important decisions first with the child, and take proper account of the child's views and concerns. They are honest with children and keep them informed about what is happening and what is going to happen, in good time.

Children told us some of their concerns about social workers too: social workers getting overruled by finance people after they have decided what is best for the child, being difficult to get hold of or breaking their promises, and constant changes of social worker.

The top five sorts of help received from social workers were help with personal problems, listening, help in staying safe, help getting ready to leave care, and speaking on the child's behalf. The most important social work task is finding the right placement.

The top five unmet needs for extra social work help were getting a passport, getting access to a personal file, getting ready to leave care, clothing allowances, and more help with personal problems. Children wanted



information about leaving care, about where to turn for help and advice on particular issues, and about what is happening in their birth family.

Half the children in this consultation in 2006 told us their social worker does not speak to them alone during visits, and a quarter have to talk to their social worker in front of their carer. This makes it impossible to raise sensitive issues and concerns. Children want to be able to speak to their visiting social worker on their own during every visit.

**'Social workers are like young people – you have your good and bad ones'**

# Boarding school placement

*Boarding school placement, August 2006*

This was a report of the experience of children placed in boarding schools on welfare grounds.

The children's 'boarding needs' included the need for placement stability, to move away from problems in their home area, care in term time to help relatives carry on caring in the holidays, and extra educational support.

The best things about boarding were being with friends, making new friends, living in a community, opportunities and plenty of activities, learning independence, learning to get on with people, and having a choice of other children and staff around to help with problems. Doing prep at school, with support from friends and staff, helped with education.

Busy school life could distract you from home problems. Counsellors were appreciated in some schools. Bullying was no more a problem than in day schools.

The worst things about boarding were missing your family (and sometimes being homesick), staying at school at the weekend if most others went away, hectic school life, lack of privacy (and sometimes not being able to be alone), sometimes lack of confidentiality about personal information, and missing the school community when you left.

**'You learn to live with people even if you don't like them'**



Boarding school was bigger and more demanding than many expected, with more routines, more activities (and more adults involved in activities), and big differences between boarding houses. Some found it hard to be away from their families; others found it easier to get on with them when they went home. Some weekly boarders found it difficult switching every week between school and home life. Children said it is vital to make proper arrangements for the school holidays – some spent holidays moving between different friends.

Being placed in a boarding school by social care services could lead to being asked many questions, and to either being given extra support or getting singled out. The first few weeks could be difficult while settling in, until they were seen as just part of the boarding community.

Children wanted their social worker to make quick decisions about funding and giving permission for school activities.

Children said boarding doesn't suit everyone – you have to visit different schools and be placed in the right one for you – but if you are in a boarding school that suits you, the placement can be very positive.

# Children's views on standards of care

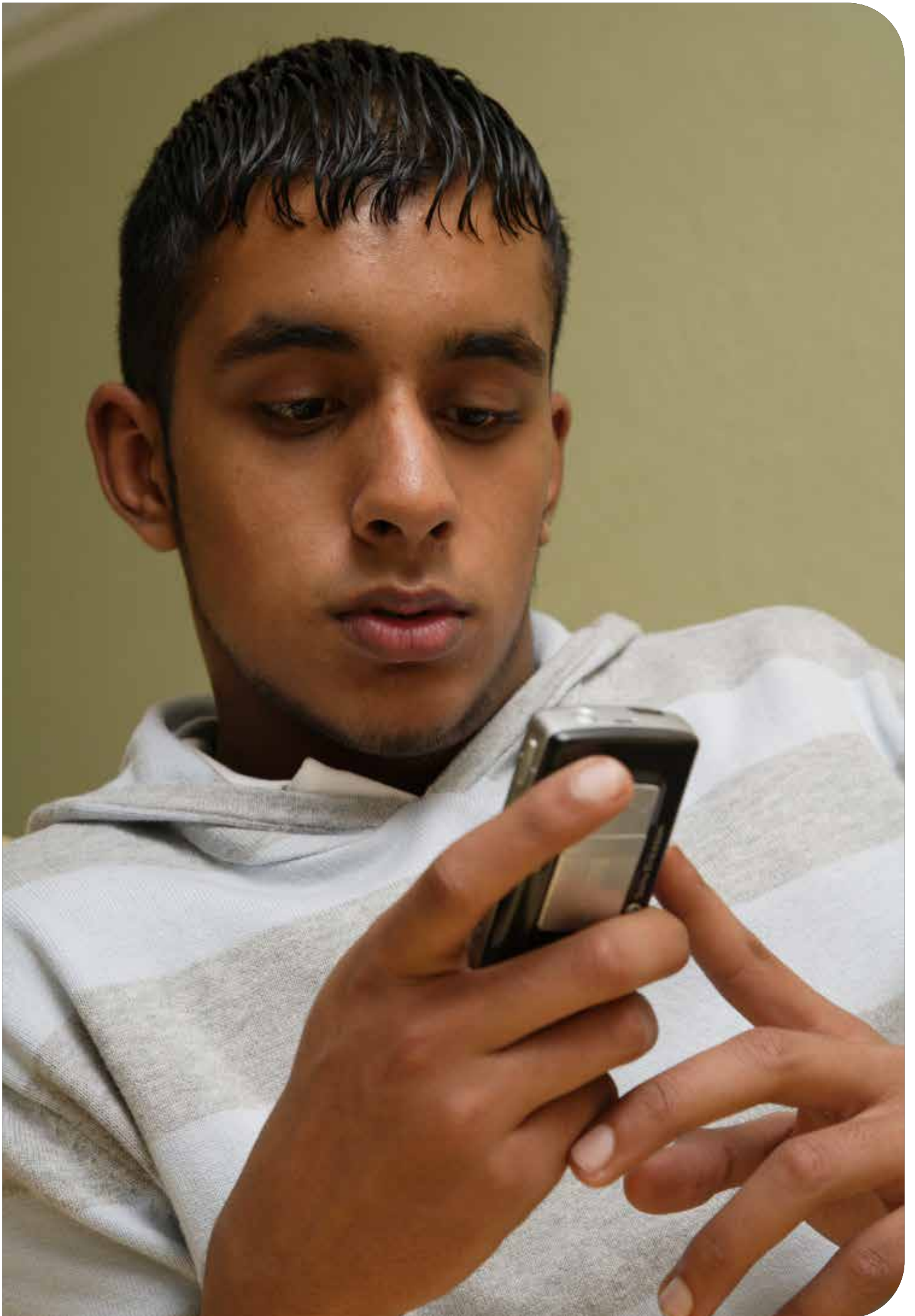
*Children's views on standards*, September 2006

Below is a selection from a major report which listed 50 issues that children living away from home say makes a good caring service.

According to children, a good service:

- treats each child as an individual, not part of a group
- takes what a child says as seriously as what an adult says
- gives children a say in decisions according to understanding not age
- constantly asks children for their views and concerns, takes these into account, and feeds back what will happen
- helps with both personal and practical problems
- has staff who help children cope with pressure, reduce bullying, restrain if needed without hurting, and reduce small issues and conflicts before they become big ones
- tells children their rights and entitlements
- helps young people leave care gradually and only when they are ready to leave
- never brings a child back from a placement for any reason other than that child's best interests
- is good at keeping children safe
- has a complaints procedure which actually 'sorts it'
- gets children advocates to help them
- makes sure education feels relevant to each child
- gives children space to be alone if they want
- makes the best decision for each child, not to meet targets
- keeps children posted on what is happening, even when not much is happening
- is good at care planning and including the child's views in their plans
- doesn't discriminate against children in care or care leavers
- tells children about risks, even if they get scared
- only tells staff what they need to know about a child
- is fair between children, and between children and adults
- has clear rules about touching children or being alone with a child.

'Not all children  
are the same'



# Placements, decisions and reviews

*Placements, decisions and reviews, September 2006*

This reported on children's experience of councils as their 'corporate parents'.

Many children said they find it hard to express themselves in mainly adult review meetings, and to hear their personal problems being discussed in front of them by a daunting group of professional adults, many of whom they don't know. They want a choice of different ways to feed their views in to reviews and decisions, to feel safe in expressing views and concerns, and to be asked before a decision is made, not consulted afterwards. Children want their feelings to count too – even for very young children. Feelings 'just are' and shouldn't have to be justified.

Children often don't know who makes the final decisions about their lives and some decisions don't stay made. Finding a placement often takes too long.

Children said arguments are the most likely reason for a placement breaking down. They told us that adults usually assume a placement breakdown is the child's fault and no one else's.

It is usually best to be placed near home, not to separate brothers or sisters, and not to change school – but sometimes these might be necessary to meet a particular child's needs.

Children should only be brought back from an out-of-authority placement if it is in their best interests, after listening to their views – not because the budget has run out or the placement was supposed to be temporary.

When being placed, children wanted:

- a choice of at least two possible placements each time
- gradual introduction with visits and lots of information about the new placement (including photos)
- a social worker checking how they settle in
- and a backup placement to move to if the first doesn't work out.

**'Give kids more of a chance and a choice'**



# Adoption

*About adoption*, November 2006

*Adoption with siblings and contact with parents*,  
September 2012

*Changing adoption: adopted children's views*, January  
2013

*Improving adoption and permanent placements*,  
February 2013

*Adoption breakdowns*, March 2014

For our 2006 report, we consulted children who had been adopted or were going through the process of adoption. The report attracted significant national media interest when it was published.

Children told us the best things about getting adopted are joining a new family and being first picked up by your adoptive parents. Whether you are with, or separated from, your birth brothers or sisters is important.

The worst things about getting adopted are leaving your old family and the process taking too long. Some children felt it was their fault if their adoptive placement didn't turn out to be the right one.

Children said adoption could be improved if it was faster, involved them more and gave them more information – about their future family, about what adoption is, and about the process. It would also improve if it didn't separate brothers or sisters, and if the same social worker was involved throughout.

**'On one hand you want to be with your siblings but you also want a family – the choice is too hard'**

The Children's Guides now given to children being adopted cover most things they wanted to know about adoption and the process. Some children would like to meet others going through adoption, others would definitely not want this.

Children most wanted to know what sort of people their adoptive families are, and about other children in the family, where they live, and their beliefs. Children wanted gradual introduction to a new family, with visits and time to talk, then to be able to have a major say in any decision.

The ideal adoptive family is kind and caring, likes children and definitely wants another one, and has the same background and things in common with the child.

Once you are adopted, the best things are being part of a family, having new things to do and being loved and cared for.

The worst things are losing contact with your birth family, being teased or bullied for being adopted, feeling different and being separated from brothers or sisters.

Some said people should not try to get fostered children adopted – it depends on what is right for each child.

Seven out of eight said being adopted made no difference at school. For others, it led to some good things (like extra help) or bad things (like being bullied or teased, or being asked lots of personal questions). Over a third, especially younger children, tried to keep it a secret that they were adopted.

Seven out of 10 adopted children wanted to know, when they felt ready, about their birth families, their life before adoption, and the reasons for them having to be adopted. Over half wanted to be kept up to date with news about their birth families after they had been adopted.

In 2012 and 2013 the government was considering changes in adoption, and we consulted children on the issues in those proposals.

Overall in our 2012 consultation through discussion groups, the children thought siblings should usually be adopted together by the same family, but that it may be justifiable to separate siblings if any of them present a risk to the safety of a brother or sister; if they do not want to be placed together or get on badly with each other; if adoption is right for one sibling but not for another; if the siblings are of very different ages so that they have little in common and their future plans are very different (for instance one is about to leave care); if the siblings have very different medical, care or education needs that cannot be met in the same placement; or if one child is likely to become too much the favourite at the expense of others.

Placing siblings for adoption together would help to reduce separation anxiety, keep the bonds that siblings have between them, help keep each child's family identity, and would mean the siblings would not need to cope alone with the stresses of adoption. The law should require that where there are siblings, adoption of all siblings together should always be considered – but that does not mean adopting them together is always right.

If siblings are separated through adoption, the children believed they should always be helped to stay in contact. Contact should be regular but as often, or as rarely, as the children themselves want. Visits might need to be stopped if that is best for the children – sometimes it might be best for contact to be through 'letter box contact', making sure siblings have information about each other, even if they do not carry on meeting.

Considering proposals about the speed of adoption, the children agreed that it is important that once it has been decided that adoption is right for a child, the adoption should happen as quickly as possible. But there was also strong agreement that finding the right adoptive placement is more important than how fast or slow the process is.

Some thought that adoption is worth delaying if there is a chance of siblings being adopted together. If a family able to take siblings together cannot be found, then a new decision needs to be made on whether it is best for the children to be adopted on their own, at the cost of separating siblings, or whether the siblings should be kept together even if it means they don't get adopted. Children differed in their own views on this.

Contact with birth parents depended on whether or not this would be in the child's best interests, and was something councils should decide on the basis of what was best for the child.

Just under half the children we asked thought it was usually better to be adopted than to stay in care.

In 2013, we consulted 429 adopted children on government proposals for change in adoption. As background to proposed changes in the process, we checked exactly which bit of the adoption process was most important to children themselves. By far the most important was actually moving in to live with your adoptive parents, followed by hearing that the court order making you adopted has finally been made, followed next in importance by being first told you were going to be adopted.

Seventy-four per cent of the children voted in favour of 'fostering for adoption', where a child can move straight in with parents who plan to adopt them, initially as foster children while the adoption is being sorted out, without having to wait in a different placement for the

'Adoption can be a scary, sad and happy experience'



adoption to be agreed. Over half thought this would help make sure their adoptive parents were the right ones for them.

Although the government reasoning for ‘fostering for adoption’ was to avoid children having to move placement twice, many children were in favour of it because it would give children and parents a trial run to get to know each other and decide whether they would live well together, before the adoption was finalised.

Concerns about ‘fostering for adoption’ were that once the child had moved in with their planned adopters, the court might still not allow the adoption to go ahead; the potential parents might change their minds about adopting the child; social care services might change their mind about the adoption plan; or the child might change their mind about being adopted by the family. Adoption might turn out to be the wrong thing for the child. Things needed to be tested out through a ‘trial run of the adoption’ before anything was decided. Children themselves should have a say in whether they wanted to go for ‘fostering for adoption’.

Also in 2013, we took children to give their views on improving adoption, and on permanent placements,

directly to members of the House of Lords Select Committee on Adoption Legislation, at the request of the chair of that committee.

At that meeting, adopted children said they felt that children often don’t know what is happening during the adoption process, and it is bad to spend a long time settling in a foster placement where you are in limbo before moving to your adoptive family. Children needed more say in the process, and if they were very young, they still needed to be asked and their views listened to. Adoption could seem like a process rather than getting things right, and sometimes a child might be caught up in this even if they felt the adoption wasn’t turning out to be right for them.

The children told the committee members they agreed with adoption going as fast as possible – but speed wasn’t as important as getting things right, and there could be good reasons for going more slowly.

They thought keeping siblings together was indeed important, but that if it was not possible to keep a number of siblings together, then the effort should be made to place them for adoption at least in pairs. The group was divided over whether it was more important

to get adopted even if that meant splitting siblings, or whether it was more important to keep siblings together. Keeping in touch with siblings after adoption could be important, but it really depended on whether you knew each other well before you were adopted.

The group agreed with other children we had consulted that whether adopted children should stay in contact with their birth parents depended on what was in their best interests. Separately from issues of contact, it was important for adopted children to know why they had been given for adoption.

Adopted children definitely need support after adoption. They can be bullied because they are adopted, and schools often do not understand what adoption is or what it means to a child, and that it can affect their school performance and how other children treat them.

As with other children we consulted, those who gave their views to the Select Committee supported the idea of ‘fostering for adoption’.

They were divided in their views about how far decisions about adopting a child should take similarities and differences of religion, race, culture and language into account. The most important thing was to get the best family for each child, and for some, issues of religion, race, culture and language would be extremely important, while other factors might be more important than these for other children. What the most important factors were in finding the right family depended on the individual child.

In 2013/14, we consulted 15 children and young people aged nine to 18 who had been adopted, but whose adoptions had recently then broken down, with the result that they had returned to care. We asked them about their experience of adoption breakdown, the reasons this had happened, and how it might have been prevented. Twelve had been adopted from foster homes, one from a children’s home, one directly from their birth family, and one was already fostered with their adoptive parents. Their adoptions had lasted from two to 11 years before they broke down. All had now

returned to care, where eight were living with foster carers, three were in children’s homes, one lived with friends and one was living independently.

Five of the nine who could remember thought the time taken before they moved in with their adoptive parents had been about right for them.

While they were adopted children, nine had been in contact with their birth parents (mainly by letter), eight had not. All had brothers or sisters. Three had been adopted together with at least one of their siblings. Four had no contact with any of their siblings once they had been adopted. For others, the main contact with their siblings was by visits. Nine had wanted more contact with members of their birth family, and only two thought the amount of contact was right for them.

Since returning to care, the number having contact with their birth parents was the same as while they were adopted, but more had lost contact with siblings – the number with no contact with any of their siblings went up from four during the period of their adoption, to seven after returning to care.

The reasons given by the children for their adoption breaking down varied. Common reasons were a breakdown in relations between child and adoptive parents (in five cases) and the child’s own behaviour being difficult (in three cases). Other reasons were that the adoption had simply not worked out, difficult relations between the adopted child and one of the adoptive parents’ own children, the child committing an

**‘I was around 11 years old and didn’t really know what to say or do, so stayed silent and let it happen’**

offence, the adopted child pursuing information about their birth family, the birth of the adoptive parents' own baby, the death of an adoptive parent and poor relations with the new step-parent, breakdown in schooling, the adoptive parent adopting siblings but preferring the other sibling, and abuse.

Some children commented on aspects of the breakdown, such as feeling that it was blamed entirely on the child, that the adoption had started too suddenly with no settling down period, that the child had been adopted at the wrong age for them, and that the adoptive family was not the right match for the child from the start. Three said the adoption was no longer right for them, and it had been time to move on.

Nine children said there had been no outside help or support to try to prevent the adoption breaking down. Three said there had been some support, but this had been unsuccessful. One child had been taken out for discussions with a social worker. CAMHS had provided counselling for one child and their adoptive parents. Suggestions of other help that might have prevented adoption breakdown were more support to help the parents cope, counselling both individually and together for child and adoptive parents, a social worker knowing what was happening before the breakdown, and more support to the child for their own problems. Two children said they could have helped prevent the breakdown if they had improved their own behaviour. Three said it would have been wrong to try to prevent the breakdown, as it was right for the child that the adoption should come to an end. Seven children had no say at all over their return from adoption to care, while four said they had a lot of say in this.

Seven children had wanted their adoption to end and to return to care, five had not wanted their adoption to end. Looking back afterwards, nine thought it had been right to end the adoption, three that it had not been right that it ended. Eleven of the fifteen thought life was better for them now they were back in care, and only two that it was worse. The best things about being back in care included being with a happy family again, and being freer to take part in normal activities of young people. There

were no particular 'worst things' about being back in care that came from more than one young person, and four specifically said that nothing at all was worse back in care.

Eleven of the previously adopted children still had contact with their adoptive parents. Three children found that their adoptive parents no longer had any say in their children's lives, six had 'not much say', and four had a lot of say. Nine agreed with the amount of involvement their adoptive parents now had, but five disagreed, believing they should no longer have a say now that the child had left their adoptive family.

Ten of the children who had experienced adoption breakdown would never want another try at adoption; three would like to try again. Seven thought adoption should be considered for all children coming into care, four that it shouldn't. For some, long-term fostering would be better, and one said that if a child is settled in care and likes their life in care, one shouldn't 'move them around again' to try to get them adopted instead of staying in care. As one put it, 'It's not right for everyone but everyone deserves a chance.'

'I got adopted and that was pretty much it'



# The proposed 'ContactPoint' children's index

*Children's consultation on the Children's Index, January 2007*

*Making ContactPoint work, October 2007*

We asked children for views about a government proposal to set up a new national index of children to which professionals could refer. The first consultation was about the original proposals for a new 'Children's Index', and the second asked children for their views on the government's draft guidelines on how the index, by then called 'ContactPoint', should work. The children's views attracted much media coverage at the time, particularly over the question of keeping children's information secure.

Although ContactPoint was in the end never implemented, the children's views remain highly relevant to including information about children on any sort of database.

Children agreed that school staff and health workers should be able to look at information on the index, but only those working directly with them and not others in the same school or practice. There was concern that social workers already have access to more information than they need to know. Children proposed a rule that people should only be able to look up information on a child they were actually working with currently.

Children's main concerns were that ContactPoint should be run in a way that made sure that information about children stayed confidential from people who shouldn't see it, and that the information put on it was actually correct and up to date. Wrong information can seriously damage children. There would always be a lot of work for councils to deal with constant changes and checking of information. The children questioned whether councils being asked to keep information correct actually meant that social workers would get this job, as their own social care services information was often not correct or up to date.

Some children wanted an assurance that neither photographs of children, nor their telephone numbers, would ever be added to ContactPoint.

Many thought that children who were able to understand it should be able to see their own information, and so should their families. Children should have a right to see what was held on them on ContactPoint. Information should not stay on the index too long, and should be deleted when the child reached 18 or died.

Children thought the best way to check that information on the database was right would be to let children check their own information, or to check it with their parents or carers.

Children supported maximum security for the index. But they thought that, however complicated the security system, one day it would break down or its security would be breached. A list of all the children in the country, with details like where they live and how old they are, would always attract paedophiles. Eventually, despite police checks on users, some paedophiles would gain access to information about children, passwords and chip and pin cards would be passed on to other people, and the index would be hacked into like many other computer systems.

Social workers and other people with access to the database would always spoil even the best security by passing their security tags and passwords on to other people to use for them.

**'Each young person should know about the index and should be made aware of any workers that are entitled to see it'**

Children were worried that people they didn't know could look up information about them, and that people might find out where they lived. For some children, both in care and in boarding schools, there might be someone who might put them in danger if they ever found out where the child was living.

Anyone looking for a child on the database should have to put in what they already knew about that child, to show that they were already involved with the child and were looking for extra information, rather than (as one child said) just 'scrolling through children'.

There should be serious punishments for deliberately misusing information from ContactPoint, including putting wrong information on it. Children thought people were also likely to be found innocently looking at details of their friends' children, and this needed to be punished, but more lightly.

Fire and rescue services and the tax office should not put information on the index, children said, as that would not be about working with the child. Only people with a complete picture of the child's life should be allowed to write on the index, not those with only a limited view (like a childminder).

There was a concern that ContactPoint would probably never have information on it about some children who might have most need to be on it – such as asylum-seeking children, or children who were missing and living on the street. It would also probably not have information about children who came to the UK from abroad to go to boarding schools or further education colleges.



'I will worry my  
dad could find me'

# The 'Care Matters' Green Paper

*Care matters*, February 2007

This report gave children's views on the government Green Paper 'Care Matters', which proposed that administration's future plans for the care system.

The top 10 promises children want their councils to make to them are (in order, with the most important first).

1. A good home
2. More of the sort of help already given
3. More money for specific things like leaving care
4. To listen to children and act on what they say
5. Better help with education
6. To keep children safe
7. More activities
8. To know that everyone's needs are different
9. To keep promises made to any child
10. To provide a social worker who is effective

Children said that councils need to make and keep pledges to individuals as well as to children generally.

Children said they wanted more choice of placement and fewer changes, more say in their care, more individual support when first entering care, more information, and not to be separated from brothers and sisters.

Children wanted always to know what was in their care plans, to have more say about their plans, and to have explanations of what their plans actually mean in practice.

Black children wanted to be treated as individuals and not be seen as a group, and they wanted racism talked about openly and practically.

The government proposals at that time most supported by children were:

- being able to contact a social worker 24 hours a day, seven days a week
- having a choice of when to leave care up to 18
- social workers always checking whether relatives can care for a child instead of receiving the child into care
- having a Children's Council in each area (but councils still need to find out what children not on the council think)
- social workers spending more time with children.

Children were against targets like having fewer children in care. They said the right decision should be made for each child, and should not be influenced by how the council was doing on its targets or what it had decided for other children.

**'I want to be free of my past, better than my present, and always ambitious for my future. The only thing that can help me get there is funding and my own willpower'**

# About education

*About education, March 2007*

The report of a survey of the views of children in care about their education.

Children said the best things about school were friends, favourite school subjects, sport and teachers. The worst things were lessons, bullying, teachers, and getting into trouble. Teachers are the key people – they can be either the best or worst thing about school.

Children would most like to see more support with personal and educational problems, more fun activities and trips, better school meals, better-behaved pupils, and teachers who don't make care an issue or tell everyone a child is in care.

Two thirds of those in care said they were very likely to carry on with education after school.

Nine in 10 children had someone they could turn to for help at school. Children differed on whether teachers should know they are in care; some said it depends on what difference it makes to how they are treated or supported, and only those who need to know should know. Children in care didn't want everyone knowing about their personal life, and said teachers should keep this confidential. Being in care can mean more support, or that people assume you won't succeed at school. Nearly two thirds said they get a lot of help with school work from their carers. Foster carers were slightly more likely than homes staff to attend parents' evenings. Carers were the main source of advice about education, followed by school staff.

Children in care but out of school were usually either waiting for a school place to fit their needs following a change of living placement, or excluded or suspended from school. Schools suspended or excluded children for many different reasons, and had very different levels of tolerance of problems before they suspended or excluded a child. The experience of being suspended or excluded could be fun or boring. Some children said they missed their friends and realised they were missing out on their education and their future; being out of



school didn't improve their problems. Children said they needed help to sort out the problems that had led to them being suspended or excluded, and to be given educational work to do.

Over 70% had changed school on coming into care, and a third had left their last school because they were moved to a new placement. Half said changing school had been a good thing for them, 28% that it had been a bad thing. It depended on whether the new school provided a better education for the child than the old one, and on how good the child was at making new friends.



# Policy by children

*Policy by children, March 2007*

This is a compendium of social care policies proposed by children through Children's Rights Director consultations over the previous three years, intended as a sourcebook for policy-makers. It is still an important policy list to have in one place.

**On safeguarding**, children identified the key areas for policies as countering bullying; smoking and substance abuse; child-focused risk assessment (including risky times and places, and regular consultation with children); local policies on adults touching or being alone with a child; competent first aid; choosing who to go to with a problem; and telling even young children about dangers, including abuse.

**On placement in boarding school**, children wanted the policy that this should be considered for each child in care but only if it suits them and the right school is chosen, with proper plans for the school holidays.

**On restraint**, children wanted policies focused on de-escalating situations before restraint is needed; having clear rules, which are actually implemented, that limit restraint to preventing injury or damage and prohibit its use as punishment or just to make children do as they are told; proper staff training to restrain without causing pain or injury; and including in care plans the best way to calm each child.

**On complaints**, children wanted policies to include getting things resolved quickly; making positive suggestions as well as complaints; not passing complaints to the carers complained about; and taking what a child says as seriously as what an adult says.

**On inspection**, children wanted inspectors to listen directly to children but keep individual children's identities confidential; to explain the basis for their questions (children said they are often told to help their place to 'pass' the inspection); to make more visits to bad services but not to leave good services without frequent inspections; to consider the effect of their findings or recommendations on children; to

follow up when changes are needed; and to feed findings back to children.

**On foster care**, children wanted policies on giving carers training for any special needs of the child; giving child and carers much more information about each other before placement; being clear whether the child can stay beyond 18; gradual introductions; and opportunities for foster children from different families to meet if they want to.

**On hobbies and activities**, children wanted opportunities to try and develop personal hobbies as well as join in group activities, and to be able to keep their hobbies and activities if they change placement.

**Young carers** wanted policies to ensure that their own support needs are met and that they aren't simply seen as providing a service to whoever they are caring for; that they get training and necessary equipment for their caring tasks; that there are sufficient support and respite care groups for young carers; and that they get support at school together with allowances made for the pressures of their caring tasks.

**On sharing confidential information**, children's policies require only the minimum information to be passed on, on a 'need to know' basis; that information is only passed on if that will benefit the child or prevent serious harm to the child or someone else; that children should choose whether they wish to repeat their story to different people or have one adult passing it on to others; and that a child's say in whether or not information is passed on should be based on the child's understanding, not their age.

**Policies on leaving care** should include never having to leave care until the young person feels and is ready, leaving care gradually, and having (and knowing about) clear entitlements to money and support, including help with immediate and follow-on accommodation.

**Proposed policy on running away** includes the chance to talk to an independent person after return, and action being taken to deal with any placement or personal problems that might be linked to running away.

# Care standards

*Children on care standards*, December 2007

*Future care*, October 2008

The first report set out what 433 children said about the future standards there should be for looking after children in children's homes, foster care, boarding schools, residential special schools and residential family centres, and for children supported by social care services. The second gave the views of 686 children on new National Minimum Standards then being drawn up for care and residential education.

According to the children consulted, children should know what the standards are for the place they are living in. Children should be treated fairly and with respect, be kept safe and helped to grow healthily.

Care placements should not separate brothers and sisters.

Staff working with children should be the right sort of people, properly recruited and checked. They should not shout or swear at children, or belittle them. Children should be involved in recruiting staff. Changes of staff should be kept to a minimum, to give children stability.

Future rules should make sure that staffing levels should be set to deal with times when children themselves thought there were not enough staff around, with extra staff if children had disabilities, special needs or behaviour problems. Children thought that staff should not be allowed to start any work with children until their police checks were completed.

Personal information about a child should only be passed on to people with a real need to know it. Children should be asked if information about them can be passed on, or told about it if it has to be passed on. Staff should not discuss children in front of other people.

Complaints should be sorted out where children live, and if that is not possible, by the service that placed the child there.

If a child has to be moved because they are not being looked after properly, their views about what should happen should still be asked and taken into account.

Children should have privacy. They should be able to get away from other people to be on their own when they want to. Staff should knock before entering a child's bedroom.

Places where children live should be spacious, have facilities for their activities, be in good repair and decoration and be in good locations. They should be able to meet any special needs children have. Good buildings to live in were safe, homely and clean, and had space, privacy and gardens. Children would have their own bedrooms. Bad buildings were unsafe, messy and too small.

As well as the building itself, whether a building was good or bad to live in depended on what happened in it. Activities, staff, how children were looked after and whether there was bullying were all important.

Children should have a choice of ways to tell people their views and concerns. Those in care should be able to give their views about where they live to their social worker. Each child should have a key worker who asks them what they need rather than leaving it to the child to ask for help. There should be someone available to give advice 24 hours a day.

**'Keep safe, be listened to,  
be treated fairly'**



All children should know what the rules are where they live, and how to undo things they have done wrong. Staff should discuss behaviour with children. Sanctions should not be too lengthy, and children should know when they are over. Nobody should be stopped from seeing their family as a punishment, and there should be rewards for good behaviour.

Children thought new National Minimum Standards should tell children and young people how they should be cared for, tell parents how their children should be cared for and tell staff what they should be doing. Next, children saw the standards as important for inspectors to know what to check, to show what staff need to be trained in, to tell managers what they need to check on and to tell people starting a new service what to do. Children did not want any of the existing National Minimum Standards to be left out of the future standards.

Children saw the most important standards then being proposed by the government as those about privacy, respecting children's culture and background, keeping children safe, keeping children healthy, keeping bullying down and treating children fairly.

Standards could say that security cameras were acceptable, as long as they were for safety and were only outside the building.

Before moving in, children wanted a children's guide to any home or school, covering who will care for them, who else lives there, what the place is like, the rules there are to keep, what their bedroom will be like and whether or not it is shared, where they will go for schooling, and local facilities and activities.

Children wanted future standards to have rules to keep children safe on the internet by blocking unsuitable sites and chat rooms, adult supervision of internet use, internet safety to be taught to all children, and computers to be where adults could supervise children using them.

**'Safe, with caring people,  
warm and friendly inside'**

# Bullying

*Children on bullying*, February 2008

This report sets out the experiences and views of bullying given by 319 children.

According to those consulted, bullying is something that hurts people who can't defend themselves and don't deserve what happens to them. Bullying depends on how it affects someone, not on what is being done, and it is worse if it is done by a group.

The most common sort of bullying is verbal, the next is being hit, and it most often comes from those of around the same age. Joking and teasing may be bullying, depending on how it affects someone. Bullying by mobile phone or messaging is increasing. Most said bullying is getting worse.

Like people in any group, children will pull themselves up in the group by pushing others down. Children told us that this is not bullying unless there is just one victim.

Bullying is most likely to happen at school (especially when there are no staff around), in children's homes or residential schools, in the street or in quiet places.

Sixty per cent of bullying is by someone who has bullied the victim before, 40% by a new bully.

Being seen as different from others makes someone likely to be bullied. So does being seen as unable to stand up for yourself, or not having friends.

Children are better than adults at spotting who is likely to be bullied.

Children's advice on staying safe from bullying is to build up friendships, avoid trouble, blend in and try to avoid being seen as different.

Adults can help children build friendships and not stand out as 'different' individuals. But someone can start bullying as a way of getting accepted as part of a group of friends.

Almost anything the victim says or does to try to stop a bullying incident can make it worse. It is best to avoid crying or losing control in a way bullies find amusing.

When they see bullying, children are most likely to stay and watch, for fun, excitement, or because they are scared. They are more likely to help the victim if they are family or a friend.

Victims can feel upset, angry and even suicidal. Just under one in five children worry a lot or most of the time about getting bullied – especially when they move somewhere new.

They are most likely to talk to a friend about bullying, and next most likely a member of staff.

Children cannot predict what adults will do when they find out about bullying, but although adults usually help (especially for younger children), they can make things worse without meaning to.

**'It can never be actually stopped, but you should try before it goes too far'**



# Advocacy

*Children's views on advocacy, May 2008*

*Young people's views on complaints and advocacy, December 2012*

Our 2008 report gave the views and experiences of advocacy given by 138 children in care and care leavers.

Just over half had heard of advocacy, though seven out of 10 said they had at some time had a person speaking out on their behalf. A third of these people were advocates, the rest were most likely to be social workers, key workers, parents or relatives, teachers or other carers. They had spoken out for children most often about personal issues, court or legal matters, care planning or reviews, family contact and education issues such as getting back into school.

One in five children said they wouldn't know how to get someone to act as an advocate for them. Some children had been given wrong information about what an advocate is (for example, confusing them with independent visitors, or being told that they were people who helped with school work).

Some advocates had helped on a particular occasion, others were regular visitors to children. Some children and young people wanted advocates to listen to the child's view and then help to put it forward for them. Others wanted advocates to give them advice and help sort their problems out. Still others wanted advocates to be powerful people who could fight a child's cause strongly for them.

Children said the ideal advocate is a good listener and speaker, who understands children's issues, is reliable and respects privacy. Over half thought advocates should be independent of the people looking after the children, but others thought that being part of the same organisation could help advocates to sort out some issues. Children wanted a choice of advocate, and to be able to change their advocate if they wanted.

Those who had been supported by an advocate were very positive about how well their advocate had listened to their views, put them across, made others listen and kept good privacy. The great majority said having an

advocate had made a difference for them.

The main criticism of advocates was that they sometimes put over their own opinions as well as the views the child wanted them to put across.

For the future, children did not want advocates and independent visitors to be the same people, and wanted to be able to have an advocate for any issue they needed one for, and not only when they made a complaint. However, many wanted to have their own independent personal adviser rather than necessarily an advocate to help them get their views across.

In our 2012 report on complaints and advocacy, a third of those who had made complaints had been supported by an advocate. The top sorts of help from an advocate were making sure their complaint got dealt with properly, saying what the child wanted them to say to people, advising the child and explaining things to the child.

Children said that advocates needed to be very good listeners. Even though they could put things across strongly, they should not decide what should be said for the child and only do their idea of what is best for you – they must have the child's permission for whatever they do or say for the child, and follow the child's decision. Advocates should keep the child's information confidential. The child should have a choice of advocate.

A lawyer was helpful when a child was frustrated that they could not get anything done or changed. A lawyer could fight on your side and fight for you in a court, and they are good at getting you out of trouble with the police.

Sixty-six children told us in 2012 how helpful they had, or had not, found the advice and assistance they had got from the Office of the Children's Rights Director. Three quarters had found it helpful, and a quarter had not found it helpful. The most common problem children asked for help with was being moved from one placement to another.

Just under a quarter of the children knew what the Ombudsman is, and one in 13 had actually made a complaint to the Ombudsman.

# New Regulations: 2009

*Future rules, February 2009*

This report set out the views of 136 children who were consulted on what should be in the Regulations the then government planned to issue under the Children and Young Persons Act 2008.

The children thought the Regulations should say that every child in care must be visited by someone from the council at least once a month, with extra visits if the child has problems, needs to talk or is unhappy.

Before returning a child to their family home, the council should make sure this will be safe, and that the parents really are able to look after the child again, and should listen to the child's views. The child should be removed from home again if they are no longer safe, are not being looked after properly again, or are unhappy back home.

Disabled children, those out of contact with their family and lonely children need an independent visitor to visit, befriend and advise them. People who have been in care themselves would make ideal independent visitors.

The main reasons a child could be placed out of the council's area were to keep the child safe, if they needed to be away from where their family were or if they wanted to move a long way away (for example, for a fresh start away from where they had been getting into trouble).

If social workers work for an organisation other than the council, the Regulations should make sure they do not make important decisions – especially about children's placements – without taking the child's views into account, that they are safe to be with children and that they keep children's confidentiality.

The member of staff appointed in a school to help children in care should help with school work, be available for support and advice, give help the child wants, and make sure the child is OK in and out of school. Councils should try not to make children aged 15 or 16 change schools, but this could be right if it would make them safer or happier, give them better services or move them from problems where they are.

Independent Reviewing Officers should listen to children and make sure they are happy with their plans, their views are heard and their plans are kept to – and be powerful enough to do something about it if they are not. Children and young people wanted them to keep in touch between review meetings, see the child one-to-one, keep checking things are OK for the child and explain important decisions.

Finally, the Regulations should make sure that each care leaver is asked what help they think they need, and whether they have enough money and somewhere to live that is OK.

**'Make sure everyone  
does what meant to'**

# Life in children's homes

*Life in children's homes, April 2009*

This report gave the experience of 117 children from 55 children's homes.

Best about children's homes were staff, activities, making friends, outings, support from staff and other children, good care, facilities and your own bedroom. Worst were missing your family, rules, living with people you don't get on with and when the staff aren't good.

The best staff were kind, caring, good listeners and helpers, fun, happy, easy to get on with, supportive, understanding and encouraging, and kept children safe. Poor staff were moody, too strict, shouted or had favourites. Staff make the difference between good and bad homes, and overall children were positive about staff.

Compared with living in a family, children's homes had more rules, were bigger and less homely and had less love. You lived with more people you didn't know well.

Good children's homes were spacious, with plenty to do, homely, had individual bedrooms, were safe, secure, had good gardens, enough toilets and showers to avoid queues, and were clean and well decorated. The worst were old, dirty, in poor repair, not homely and had lots of locked doors.

The best locations for children's homes were near activities and shops, in a pleasant, quiet area close to town, near good transport and with good neighbours. The worst were on a 'bad estate', in an unsafe area, far from family and friends, and in a remote or rural area (especially near a farm). It might be important for a child to be in a home far enough away from areas where they had got into trouble.

The main preparation for the future was being taught independence and practical skills, staff support, and help with education and training.

The biggest dangers in homes were other children, being bullied or beaten up, fires and running away. The main safety measures were staff supervision, building safety, talking with key workers, and rules. The main counters to bullying were staff supervision, rules and sanctions, and children themselves standing up to bullies.

Restraint was usually only used for permitted reasons: to stop someone hurting themselves or others, or seriously damaging property. But a few children reported use of restraint to make children do as they were told, or as a punishment, neither of which is a permitted use of restraint. A quarter of the children said restraint hadn't been used at their home during the time they had lived there.

**'Social services leaflets say a lot about the good things in children's homes, but none of the negatives'**

# Life in residential special schools

*Life in residential special schools, April 2009*

This report gave the experience of 338 children in 40 different residential special schools.

Best things about living in residential special schools were the activities and trips out, being with friends, and the staff. According to the children, the worst thing was being homesick, followed by rules and sanctions, and living with other children with problems. Forty-one per cent said they were homesick.

Many had lived in both children's homes and residential special schools. Neither was generally better – it depended on the school and the home.

Children were very positive about residential special school staff. Good staff were kind, understanding, nice people, friendly and fun, and did their caring job well. Poor staff were too strict about rules and punishments, and shouted at children. The most usual sort of help with children's problems was staff talking problems through and giving personal advice. Seventy per cent thought their school gave them all the support they needed.

Residential school buildings were good if there was plenty to do, you had your own bedroom and plenty of space, and they felt homely and safe. Old buildings were liked if they were interesting and had an interesting history, but not if they were 'spooky', smelt or had poor heating and plumbing.

Children told us the two main dangers to them were fire, followed by bullying. Disabled children were particularly worried about getting out of the building in a fire, and some older buildings seemed more at risk of fire.

The four things children thought kept them safe in residential special school were staff supervision and advice, fire alarms and drills, the security of the buildings, and children's own knowledge of how to keep themselves out of danger.

The main things helping to counter bullying were staff being around, punishments for bullying, ways of reporting bullying, and school anti-bullying campaigns.

Restraint was usually used for the permitted reasons: to stop people hurting themselves or others, or seriously damaging property. But 6% said restraint was used as a punishment, and 4% that it was used to make children do as they were told, neither of which is a permitted use of restraint. Thirteen per cent said restraint hadn't been used at their school during the time they had lived there.

The main spare-time activity was sport, followed by computing, spending time with friends, and arts and crafts. Most were happy with the activities on offer.

Most saw a healthy diet and plenty of exercise as keeping them healthy at school, but a quarter thought that junk food that they themselves added to the school diet was unhealthy for them.

'You can talk to staff and they help you to sort it out'

# Life in residential further education

*Life in residential further education, April 2009*

This was a report of the experience of 149 residential students under 18 in 14 different further education (FE) colleges.

According to these students, the best aspects of residential life in an FE college were social life, activities, learning independence, enjoying new freedoms away from home and not having to travel long distances between home and college.

The three most common differences from living at home were being with friends, having independence and responsibility, and being without parental supervision. Sixty-one per cent of residential students were homesick.

Students rated their accommodation as good if students got on with each other, had good internet access, kitchens and bathrooms; it was homely, safe and secure; near town, shops and transport, and close to residential and study buildings. Whether rural locations were liked was a matter of personal taste.

Living at college meant more encouragement and time to study, less travelling, but also more distractions from studying. The two main activities outside work time were sporting or fitness activities and socialising.

Some students were concerned that their diet, often supplemented by junk food and takeaways, had become unhealthy.

The best college staff were friendly, helpful, fair, approachable and easy to contact. Students disliked staff who treated them 'like children', supervised too closely, were too strict or were moody.

Over three quarters of the students we consulted thought that they were supervised 'very' or 'fairly' closely outside teaching time. Half thought this was 'about right', a third that it was 'a bit too much' and 13% that it was 'much too much'. The two main differences in supervision between those under and over 18 were curfews for under-18s and not being allowed alcohol.

The main welfare support was having special staff available to give support when they needed it. Almost half thought their college gave them enough welfare support.

The three main dangers students identified were the risks of not having parental supervision, strangers coming on to campus, and not looking after themselves properly.

The main things keeping students safe were secure entrances to buildings, CCTV, wardens and security staff.

Bullying was countered by staff supervision and support, together with students generally getting on well together.

**'Living away from home has really helped me grow up quicker than most people at home, it's great'**





## Life in secure care

*Life in secure care*, April 2009

We visited nine of the 18 secure units then open in England to ask the young people there about their experiences of security.

We heard that the best of living in a secure unit was that it is safe, it keeps you out of trouble and safe from people who might harm you, and it helps you to sort yourself out. For many, the best thing was having your own private bedroom.

Staff make a huge difference. Children told us the best are friendly, good listeners, with a good sense of humour, and calm when things go badly. They help by talking things through. They also protect you against bullying, violence and other people 'kicking off'. Poor staff are unfair and moody, and seem to wind young people up or only be concerned with control.

Education was good if you had not had it before, but bad if you had to attend when other young people had school holidays or would have left school.

Worst things about security were loss of freedom, other people 'kicking off', being unable to do many things teenagers usually do, and being away from friends and family. So were being restrained, property being removed for safety, rules and routines, a limited choice of what to wear, not being allowed to smoke and being watched so you didn't have much privacy. Being in security could make you depressed or make you self-harm.

Giving advice on security from their own experience, young people said rooms in units are always small and should be larger, heating and ventilation should be

controlled better, and it should be easier to go into secure outside areas. Secure units should be more local to young people's homes.

Better risk assessments would allow some rules and routines to be relaxed and young people to mix more, when it was safe to do so. There should be better separation of younger people more likely to 'kick off'. Many wanted separate units for 'welfare' and 'criminal' placements.

Young people accepted cameras watching them within units, to prevent bullying and to prove innocence if they were wrongly accused of something.

Preparation for leaving included much-valued staff-supervised 'mobilities' (trips outside the unit), staff help, progressing through points systems to sort out behaviour and gain skills, and being clear about your next placement.

What young people most looked forward to after leaving security was smoking again, and being back with family and friends.

Many said they were afraid of leaving security. What they feared most was being less safe, going back to their old ways and getting into trouble again.

# Care and prejudice

*Care and prejudice, August 2009*

This report gave the views of 362 children and young people about their experience of care and about any prejudice they had experienced because they were from care.

According to the children we asked, the best things about being in care were meeting new people, having good foster carers or staff and being able to do activities and have your own possessions. The worst thing was missing your family, though this got less the longer you were away from them in care. Being in care could mean being away from dangers at home, feeling more supervised, and sometimes having to get more permissions to do things than other children did.

Being in care did not make you more likely to be treated generally better, or generally worse, than other children. Girls and foster children were more likely to report being treated better for being in care.

Better treatment usually meant getting more help and support. Worse treatment was usually about being bullied for being in care.

The longer someone was in care, the more likely they were to experience being treated worse at some time while in care.

Half the children said being in care made them feel different from others. Girls felt more different than boys. Children felt more different the longer they spent in care, mainly because they lived away from their families and had some very different experiences from other children. Other children, and professionals such as teachers, reacted differently to children in care. Sometimes this was good, sometimes bad, but people often showed fixed and not good views about people in care.

Coming into care made a difference to many things: a quarter said it stopped them seeing their family regularly, over a quarter that it had meant seeing friends less; for some it had stopped risky behaviour.

For 44% of children in this consultation, being in care meant they could not stay overnight with friends because their friends' parents hadn't been police-checked, which is not a statutory requirement.

Overall, children in care believe the public has a negative view about children and young people in care. Nearly half thought the public saw children in care as bad and uncontrollable, only one in 10 that the public saw children in care as the same as any other children.

One in eight thought the public felt sorry for them and under one in 12 that the public saw children in care positively.

Forty-five per cent of the children and young people worried about other people knowing they came from care, in case they were judged, treated differently or bullied. Some thought that if people knew they had been in care, they might have difficulty getting either work or accommodation in the future.

**'You get labelled for being in care'**

# The 2009 Ministerial Stocktake of Care

*Children's messages to the Minister, November 2009*

This was a report to the then Children's Minister of the views of 437 children for the 2009 Ministerial Stocktake of Care. One hundred and fifty-two of the children attended consultation events with the Minister present.

According to the children we asked, local councils are doing best at keeping children in care safe and making sure they achieve well, and worst at keeping them healthy, making sure they enjoy activities and leisure, helping them make a contribution to the community and helping them prepare to get good jobs.

Over a third of members of Children in Care Councils reported being often discriminated against for being in care. Two thirds thought the opinions of their Children in Care Councils made 'some' or 'a lot of' difference to what happened for children in care. Forty-two per cent of members reported that in their authorities children are only allowed to stay overnight in friends' houses if their friends' parents have been police-checked (never a government requirement), and 45% said that the last time someone they knew moved to a new placement, their possessions had been carried in plastic rubbish bags.

Sixty-five per cent of Children in Care Council members voted that children in care should get visited no less often than once a month by someone from the council. Children should have a choice of social worker and talk to them one to one in private. Some told the Minister their carers were usually there when they were talking to their social worker.

Children in Care Council members reported that the main reasons for children running away from care were being unhappy with their placements, being unhappy with how they were being treated by carers, not being listened to, or feeling generally bad.

The subjects most discussed so far by Children in Care Councils were their local council's Pledge to children in care, setting up the Children in Care Council and support for children in care. Children in Care Councils should organise more activities for their members and give more information and support to children in care.

The three government proposals at the time that children thought would make the biggest difference for children in care were providing more money for those going to university, not moving children aged 15 or 16 to a new school, and helping young people to stay in placements until they were 21. Changing placements could be either a bad experience or a fresh start.

Seventy-seven per cent of Children in Care Council members thought things were generally getting slightly better or much better for children in care, and one in 10 that things were getting slightly or much worse for children in care.

'Listen to us, check if we need anything, help us stay in contact with our family, remember we are people'

# Contact with families and friends

*Keeping in touch*, December 2009

*Adoption with siblings and contact with parents*,  
September 2012

Our 2009 report gave the experience of 370 children in care on keeping in touch, and losing contact, with family and friends.

Children wished to be able to choose to keep in touch with family and friends who in turn wanted to keep in touch with them, unless this was unsafe, and wanted social workers to help them keep contact.

Contact was often lost as time passed, when children moved to new placements, or when someone such as a brother or sister was adopted.

Keeping in touch could be by visits, phone, email, networking sites and photographs. Having news of your birth family could be very important. Meeting people again after losing contact could be strange and should be gradual.

The longer a child had been in care, the more likely they were to have lost contact with parents, brothers and sisters. Half had at least monthly contact with their birth mother, but 18% had lost all contact with her. Twenty-three per cent had at least monthly contact with their birth father, while 46% had lost all contact with him. Fifty-six per cent had contact with a brother or sister at least once a month, and 36% had at least monthly contact with a relative other than a parent, brother or sister.

Thirty-five per cent had lost all contact with friends they had before coming into care, while 14% had at least monthly contact with a friend they had made in an earlier placement.

Few kept in regular contact with previous carers: 16% (mainly foster children) had at least monthly contact with a previous carer.

Eighty-one per cent of children in care in this consultation who had at least one brother or sister who was also in care had been separated from them in care. Boys, and children in children's homes, were more likely to live separately from brothers or sisters. Most thought siblings should be kept together in care, but many thought it sometimes right to place siblings in different placements if there was a good reason.

Possible reasons would be if siblings didn't get on together, if there was danger to any of them or if they wanted to be separated. Losing contact with siblings was most likely to happen once a child had spent between two and six years in care.

The three best ways for siblings to keep in touch were by visits, by phone or email, and by having photos of each other.

In 2012, we consulted children in care further about contact, in the light of proposals at that time to change the legal provisions on contact. Children underlined the importance of keeping contact with birth parents: losing contact could damage a placement, and keeping at least some contact kept open the option of more contact again when the young person was older. Contact with parents keeps you in touch with your own culture and family history and can be a route to information and contact with brothers and sisters. You have a right to know who your parents are, even if you don't live with them. There is a blood bond.

On the other hand, contact for some could hinder settling into a new placement, could keep children in touch with risks and negative influences, and contact could be stressful. Some were concerned that keeping in contact with parents could lead social care services to start planning to send you back to live at home again. Contact should depend on whether both the child and the parents want to stay in touch – but even if they don't, the option of renewing contact in the future should be kept open.

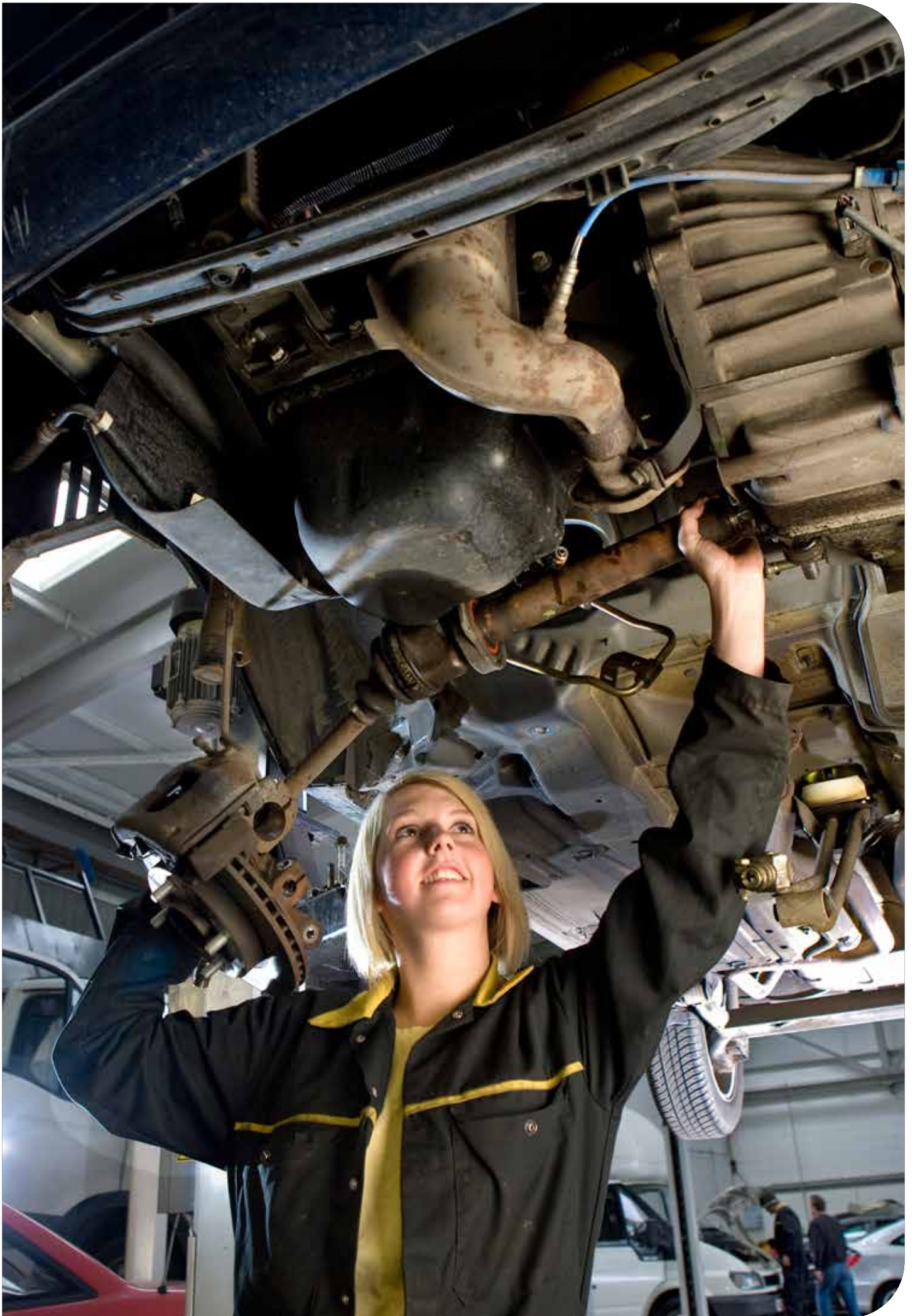




Not all the children knew that the law says that social care services must help children keep in contact with their birth parents unless it is not safe or is not in their best interests. And not all the children were being helped to keep in contact with their birth parents. This was not always anything to do with their safety or best interests, but contact had stopped for reasons that were nothing to do with either the child or their parents. We were given examples of contact being stopped as a punishment, and some thought their foster carers had prevented contact because they did not like the child's birth parents. Some thought social workers had not really assessed what was in the child's best interests, but used that as an excuse for not working hard to maintain contact for the child.

Overall, the children supported keeping the law on contact as it is – that social care services must help every child in care to keep in contact with their birth parents unless it is not safe or is against the child's best interests. IROs should check that this is being done.

**'Don't split us up. It is hard enough coming into care without not seeing my brother/sister'**



# Getting advice

*Getting advice*, January 2010

This report gave the experience of 351 children in care and care leavers about getting information and advice.

Social workers were seen as the most usual source of advice and personal information overall, though for foster children their foster carers were the most usual source. Friends, then parents, came next, then teachers, siblings (especially for those in their first two years in care) and doctors. The internet came just below doctors, but above leaflets and books.

Eighty-seven per cent said they were getting all, or nearly all, the advice they needed. Children could miss out on information they wanted if adults thought it might be upsetting.

Children wanted to know why they were in care. Sixty-eight per cent said they had been told everything they needed to know about why they came into care. Those who had been in care more than six years were less likely to know why they were in care.

Children needed more advice and information in times of change: when first coming into care, when they were without a social worker or during a change of social worker, when changing placements, and when leaving care.

Children most wanted more advice about emotional and physical well-being, how to look after themselves, and plans for their future. Twenty per cent said they didn't know enough about the plans for their future and 8% that they weren't told enough about their care reviews. Some wanted to know who could attend their reviews, and to have their own copies of review minutes.

Some wanted to know what to expect when first coming into care, about any problems happening back at home, and about education, money, legal ages for various things, cooking and shopping. It was, however, possible to be given too much information.

The best ways of getting advice and information were through booklets or websites, as long as they were young-person-friendly, and through face-to-face discussions. Some preferred written information, some face-to-face discussions, and some preferred not to use the internet. It was important to know where to go for advice.

Adults giving advice to children need to be prepared to explain as well as tell, and to look up what they don't know.

'Aggression comes out of not knowing'



# Planning, placement and review regulations

*Planning, placement and review*, February 2010

This report gives the views of 58 children on issues in the new Regulations and guidance on care planning, placement and review which were then being proposed. The views in this report led the government to make changes in the Regulations eventually issued.

Overall, children recommended that Independent Reviewing Officers should work for an independent organisation rather than the local council, that children in care should be able to have an advocate whenever decisions were being made about their lives, and that they should be able to stay as long as possible in the same placement – though it could also be right to move.

Most advised that annual health assessments were not frequent enough.

Overall, they advised that the proposed six-weekly social worker visits to children during the first year of a placement, and three-monthly visits after the first year, are not often enough.

The majority agreed that children should never have to change schools in years 10 or 11 (at examination or qualification time), but many advised that they should still change schools if their placement had gone wrong.

Most supported new rules that there should be a choice of more than one new placement at each move, and a back-up placement available if the child didn't settle, that if possible children should be able to carry on at the same school or college when they moved placements, and that brothers and sisters should if possible be placed together. Children should usually be placed close to home, but should be placed a distance away if there was a good reason.

Placement with a 'connected person' (a family member or friend) could be a good option, but children advised that these placements could also be unsafe and should be checked out before they were made, like any other placement.

Reviews should be less formal, and the child should agree where they were held and who should attend. Teachers should not usually attend and meetings should not usually be held at school, where they might make a child in care stand out. Reviews should check whether decisions from previous reviews have been carried out, and whether the child is getting what they are entitled to – if not, the Independent Reviewing Officer should take action.

Care plans should include immigration issues and the young persons' finances. Placements or care plans should only be changed without a review meeting in an emergency.

Accommodation for care leavers should be safe from risks from other people, either locally or in the same accommodation.

**'If they're used to being around the same area, getting into trouble, the child may want to move away to a different area and different school, for a clean start'**

# Fairness and unfairness

*Fairness and unfairness, June 2010*

This report gave the views and experience of 268 children in boarding schools, children's homes and other care and residential settings on fairness and unfairness.

Children defined fairness as being treated equally unless there was a good reason for different treatment, having your rights, being listened to, having what you ought to have, only being punished proportionately and for things you had actually done, and getting on together without anyone being left out.

Unfairness was most commonly being wrongly blamed for something. It could also be when someone else is treated better than you, when children who misbehave get more attention and help than others, and when you are labelled and treated according to your past, or just one past incident.

Children were treated most fairly by adults running activities. Next most fair were doctors and health workers, though it was unfair when they kept you waiting to see them, or did not take your health worries seriously.

Next most fair were school and college staff, then adults looking after children, then friends, then people you were paying for a service or buying something from, and then other children generally.

Children were not treated very much more fairly by friends than by other children. Children were treated least fairly by the general public.

Most usual reactions to being treated unfairly were telling a parent or teacher, or doing nothing. Being treated unfairly made children feel sad, upset, angry and bad about themselves. They feel angry when they see others being treated unfairly and feel they should be doing more to help. Children feel more strongly about being treated unfairly than about almost anything else.

To be treated fairly, it was important to treat others the way you expected them to treat you, to be polite, and to tell someone if you were being unfairly treated. To be fair, adults should support children equally, be kindly and listen to their views and feelings.

Being treated fairly made children feel happy and good about themselves. Seeing others treated fairly was good, though there could be jealousy if they were treated better than you.

Children most likely to be treated unfairly by other children were those who are 'different' in any way, who misbehave, are disabled, or are from a different race or culture.

Those most likely to be treated unfairly by adults were children who misbehave, have a bad attitude, are rude or unkind to others, and sometimes younger children.

Overall, the way children are being treated is becoming fairer.

**'Listen to two  
sides of a story'**



## Before care

*Before care*, November 2010

This report gave the experiences of 50 children recently taken into care about how and why they had come into care, whether it could have been prevented, and about their first weeks in care.

The top three reasons given by children for coming into care were their own behaviour (they were getting into trouble, or their families were unable to cope with their behaviour), followed by the need to protect the child from abuse or other risks at home, and then problem relationships between children and their families.

Before coming into care, the amount of help children had been given for themselves varied widely, but most thought the help that had been given was indeed helpful, and few thought they had needed more help. Over half thought their families had been given some or a lot of help before their children were taken into care, but just over one in five didn't think their families had been given any help. Very few children thought that extra help would have kept them out of care.

Even if they had initially not wanted to come into care, by the time of their first review in care, seven out of 10 children thought coming into care had been either probably or definitely the right thing to happen. Children who had not wanted to come into care at the time were about twice as likely afterwards to think it had been right than that it had been wrong for them.

Children's contact with social workers before coming into care also varied widely – out of 50 children, 16 had met a social worker weekly or more, while 11 said they had only met a social worker once, and another 11 that they did not meet one until they had actually come into care. Fewer than half had been told how they could contact a social worker before they came into care.

The top five feelings children had on the day they came into care were in order (without any suggestions from us) scared, upset, sad, nervous and worried. The one thing that would have made their first day easier would

have been to know more about what was happening. More than half the children had not known they were coming into care until it actually happened to them. Thirty-seven out of the 50 children had less than a week's notice that they were coming into care.

Only eight of the 50 children we consulted told us they had any choice over where they were to live when they first came into care. Two thirds had moved into their new placement without being taken to visit it first.

Having come into care, the top good things in the first few weeks were having friendly carers and having fun things to do. The top bad things were missing your family and feeling negative about having come into care. Over three quarters thought their lives were generally better than they had been before they came into care.

In terms of the future, just over three quarters of the children knew what their care plan said about whether or not they would be returning to their family. One in three did not know when they would be likely to leave care again, but most expected to be staying in care for at least two years. One in three thought they would be in care for less than six months. The top two reasons for expecting to leave care were when things had been sorted out at home, and when the young person became 18.

**'Being in care can be OK, even a good experience, if you have the right placement and a good social worker. I think the care system's main priority should be making sure both these things are OK'**

# Having corporate parents

*Having corporate parents, January 2011*

We asked 88 children in care to tell us their key points about being a child with a local authority as their 'corporate parents'.

Children thought it was better to have a number of professionals around them doing different things for them, rather than just one trying to do everything needed – but there should be no more professionals than the child needs.

On care reviews, children thought these should be held in 'professional places', not where the child lives or goes to school, because holding reviews in 'children's places' leads to the other children knowing about them – and even overhearing them.

Some had been well supported by Independent Reviewing Officers, but views about IROs varied, and some had not known their IRO until they had come to chair their review, while others had experienced IROs changing just like their social workers had done. It was important that IROs kept in touch with the child, gave their contact details to the child, and really did follow things up for the child.

Those who had an Independent Visitor valued them, and said that how you got on with your Visitor was all important. Having one or not should be the child's choice.

Again, we heard concerns about frequent changes of social workers, and whether social workers who kept changing could really know what was best for a child and get decisions right for them. Some thought that it was senior social care services staff who didn't know the child who made the decisions anyway, rather than their social workers.

Moving placements is stressful – and different placements always have different rules about everyday things that you have to learn very quickly and follow if you are to get on OK there. These were often about things like whether you were allowed to get food from the fridge if you were hungry, or whether you can have a shower when you want to without asking first. You often had to stop some hobby or activity you liked

when you moved to live in a new area. Some had been able to stay in a good and stable placement, but others told us that it had been right and in their interests to change from a placement that was not turning out to be right for them.

About a third of the children consulted had been given a good reason for moving placements last time they moved, and another third had been given no reason. Sometimes a placement move was not to do with the child, but because of things that were happening to other people, in the carers' lives, or because of rules about a placement being a short-stay place, however well you were doing there, or because of the cost of the placement you were in. Children tended to feel they always took the blame for a placement breaking down or not turning out to be the right placement for them after all.

Moving placements can be made less stressful if it is only done when it is in the child's best interests, and if the move is done gradually rather than with little or no notice, with plenty of information about the new placement, visits before moving, and if possible a trial period first. It is vital to get a placement that matches the child, and that the child knows why they are moving.

Having detailed records kept of your life was a factor in being in care. Having your big arguments put on file for ever happened to those in care, but not to children who aren't in care.

Schools make a big difference to the life of a child in care. Moving placements often means changing schools, and this can be a good thing or a bad thing, but often means losing friends and having to make new friends, sometimes very often. Some were concerned about how confidential school keeps the information that they are a child in care. Time travelling to and from school makes a big impact on everyday life, especially if the child travels long distances every day in order to avoid a change of school.

Life in care, including foster care, often depends on how far the people looking after you try to be like parents to you, and the number and nature of the other children you are living with.

# Family justice

*Children on family justice*, March 2011

*Family Justice Review: the children's verdict*, August 2011

We asked children for their views on the Family justice Review that was carried out in 2011.

Half of the 58 children consulted for the first of these reports thought courts never, or do not usually, make the right decisions for children, while a quarter thought courts usually or always make the right decisions. Even so, a court was still voted to be the most likely way of getting important decisions right for children. There was little support for the alternatives of people meeting to try to sort things out with the help of an outside person, or of having a professional adviser working with people while they tried to sort things out for themselves.

Eight out of 10 of the children consulted did not think either reporters or members of the public should be allowed into courts when children's cases are being heard.

Children wanted courts to hear and take account of their views. Some children might prefer to give their views by telephone, or through their social workers. Even very young children should be allowed to give their views, and children should be given a say in court according to their understanding of what is being discussed, not just their age. Most who had been involved in a court said they hadn't been able to get their views over to the court as they had wanted to. Some hadn't been given the chance, others had been too nervous to say what they wanted.

Children's main worries about going to court were the worry of whether the court would make the right decision about their future, and being daunted by 'all the people there' and about strangers hearing about their private lives and problems. Many worried that they would not be able to give the right answers to important questions in front of a court. Many were worried that their views would not be taken into account much – 'be taken with a grain of salt and barely heard'.

Being in court made children feel small ('like an ant against a human'), nervous, scared, afraid of not knowing what is going on, intimidated and like having 'stage fright'. Before going into a court, children wanted to be told exactly what was going to happen, who would be in the court making decisions, and why the court was deciding things about the child.

Children in this consultation proposed to the Family Justice Review that the justice system should always check up on what had happened to each child after a court had decided their future. This was a proposal taken up by the Review, and later accepted by the government for a pilot trial.

We later consulted another 44 children on the Review Panel's interim report, to feed into their final report. It was important that children had the option to speak for themselves in court if they wanted to, because adults often misinterpreted what the child had wanted to say. We also heard that sometimes decisions by other people really decide what things will be like after a court hearing – if a court decides to put a child in care, that is a huge decision, but what matters most then is where the child is then placed in care and what care turns out like for the child in the longer term. Courts should always take into account the child's views about their safety and welfare at home, but also about the idea of coming into care.

**'If parents screw up,  
kids will have to go'**

Children supported proposals that children of any age (not just older ones) should be given a choice of how they wanted to give their views to a court, including from a different courtroom or by telephone or video link.

They supported the same judge hearing a child's case throughout, and Independent Reviewing Officers working closely with courts.

Half thought that a time limit of six months for completing a case was too long.

They supported the proposal that both parents should continue to have a relationship with a child after parents have split up as long as this is safe – but this should depend on whether the child wants this. This should include having a parenting plan, with the child having a major say in who they want to live with and who they want to spend time with. In this, parents should have to decide whether or not they want to stay firmly part of the child's life, and should not be allowed to drift in and out of the child's life when they feel like it.

There was support for new parents getting a parenting leaflet when their child is born.

Finally, children supported judges being trained to understand and communicate with children before working on children's cases.

To make a room 'child-friendly' at court, it needs to be quiet and private, big enough to feel spacious and not crowded, colourfully painted and decorated, with toys, paper, books, crayons and other things around suitable for the age of children using the room, and, importantly, 'things to fiddle with', as this often reduces stress and helps concentration when you are stressed. It is very important that it has comfortable seats or settees. What happens in the room needs to be informal, and people should not be formally dressed.

'My life depended in the hands of a random group of strangers'

'They can't say what they mean because they're scared'

# Younger children's views

*Younger children's views*, April 2011

This was the report of the views of over 600 children aged under 12 who came to our 2010 children's summer conference. Without giving suggested answers, we asked them to answer a series of questions about things in their lives, and reported their answers in order of frequency given.

In order, and without suggestions from us, the children gave the following as the most important things in life to a child under 12: family, friends, education, being happy, carers, sport, being taken care of, leisure activities, and pets. Girls were more likely than boys to put friends high on their list.

The top three ways of staying safe were adults keeping children safe, children knowing how to keep safe (for example from road traffic), and children themselves following advice and also not putting themselves at risk by talking with strangers.

Keeping safe from bullying was a mixture of adults countering bullying, children themselves ignoring bullies, and having the protection of friends around you.

Staying safe online was a matter of being supervised by an adult, only using safe sites and avoiding 'rude sites', not talking to strangers on social networking sites, having blocks and filters on computers, never giving personal information on line, not putting photos of yourself on line – and for one in 10 children, not using the internet at all.

Children told us that the main ways they tried to stay healthy were, in order, being active, eating fruit and vegetables, and generally trying to eat and drink healthily.

In their experience, children said the best things about doctors were how they treated you – both medically and as a person – and how they advised you. Answers included helping you feel better when you were ill or injured, checking you, looking after you medically, and giving you health advice – but second on the list was

being nice and kind to the child. The two worst things about doctors were needles and the medicine they gave you to take.

Almost a third said there was no way in which they felt they were treated unfairly. Those who did feel they were sometimes treated unfairly said this was through the restrictions placed on them, by being bullied, or by being treated differently from their equals.

The children told us that what made children of their age behave well were the rewards for behaving well, and then the discipline they got from adults for bad behaviour, but then themselves listening and taking notice of what they were told.

A quarter said they had never helped someone with a disability, but of those who had, the most usual help they had given was not by doing practical things but rather by being kind to disabled people and by being their friends.

The children told us that when they needed to be alone, they would go to their own bedroom. Other ways of being alone were going to another quiet room or place in the house, going into the garden, or going out somewhere for a walk, bike ride or to see a friend.

Adults helped keep children's personal property safe by putting it somewhere safe, not letting others touch it, teaching children to respect each other's property, using strict rules and punishments, or not allowing children to go into each other's rooms without permission.

The best things about school were learning things, friends, break times, teachers, having fun and sports. Worst were some of the lessons and bullying. Thirteen per cent said there was nothing they saw as worst about school.

Where children were living away from their parents, in care, boarding school or residential special school, the most usual way of keeping in contact was by telephone. Sixty-three per cent kept in touch by telephone, 38% by contact visits, 22% by email and 14% by letter.



# Keeping children out of care – and maybe going back home

*Children on the edge of care, May 2011*

We secured the views of over 300 children for future government policy on entering care and returning children home from care.

In this consultation, 71% of the children knew why they had come into care, and fewer than one in 10 did not understand why they were in care.

Children thought councils should always take children into care if their parents were unable to look after them for various reasons such as drugs or alcohol misuse, being too deeply involved in crime, having serious money problems, or having a serious disability, or if they were abusing, assaulting or hitting their children. Family problems, dangers to the child or not keeping children safe were all good reasons for taking a child into care. Sometimes a parent might be failing to look after a child although they tried hard, and things might improve later. It could depend on how good the parents really were at being parents, even though they might have temporary problems. Some children needed to be taken into care because of their own behaviour.

Forty-three per cent thought that more support could have stopped them needing to come into care. Thirty-six per cent thought that even if they and their families had been given more support, they would still have had to come into care.

The things that might have kept the children out of care included, in order, more help for their parents or carers, more help with the child's own problems, the child managing to keep out of trouble, and money for things the family needed. If outside help is needed, it needs to be given quickly. For some, a short break period in care to relieve immediate family problems could help keep a child out of longer-term care.

Children were clear that there should be no general rule about whether it is best to try to reunite children in care with their parents. It is best for some children to stay where they are in care.

Before returning a child from care back home, each family would need to be assessed individually, with both the children's and parents' views fully and separately taken into account. This should include whether the child actually wants to go back, and whether the parents actually want them back. The assessment should cover how settled the child is now in care, and what sort of relationship they have now with their current carers. It should also look at how well parents have sorted out any problems they have, for example how they have done in rehabilitation. Some parents may need help to cope with children, but won't admit any faults or won't cooperate with any help or support.

Children shouldn't go back to their families if the assessment finds that their parents are still unable to look after them properly, if there are too many risks to the child's safety, or if their parents simply do not want them or do not love them. Children should not be returned home to save the costs of them being in care.

Nine out of 10 children had a clear view on what the long-term goal for them should be. Thirty-four per cent thought the best thing for them was to stay in care, and in the placement they were in. Another 14% thought they should stay in care, but move to a different placement. Forty per cent thought they should now leave care, but fewer than half of these thought they should go back to their birth parents. Twenty-eight per cent of all the children thought they should never go back to live with their birth family.

**'If you are in care it is for a good reason and if you go back, you could go back on the same track'**



Nineteen per cent of the children thought they should leave care and go back to live with their birth parents now. Another 5% thought it would be right to go back to their birth family some time in the next year. Another 19% thought they would one day be able to go back to live with their birth family, but only after things had been sorted out at home. Fifteen per cent thought they might be able to return to their birth family when they were much older.

If social care services were to return the children home, extra support and help would be needed to make this work. The children did not think they could be sent home and their cases closed. Sending a child back home is the start of lots of future support being needed.

**‘Keep offering the support that the child had while in care – social services shouldn’t just cut us off’**

The extra help needed to return home was, in order, more help with the child’s own problems (61% said this would be needed), more support for their parents or carers, someone outside the family to support the child and for the child to talk things over with, financial help, the child working to keep out of trouble at school or with the police, social workers visiting to support the child and family, help with family accommodation, practical help to parents with looking after their children, and better assessments and monitoring of how things were going after the child returned. This would need social workers to do random spot-check visits to the home to check what it was normally like there, and that the parents really could look after their children properly. Social workers should also talk to the child alone, somewhere the child feels safe.

Going back home should not be sudden but gradual, done cautiously and with support to children in getting to know their parents again. Going back home will always bring back underlying issues for both children and parents, and these need to be thought about and dealt with.

# Messages for the Munro Review

*Messages for Munro, June 2011*

We consulted 179 children in care and care leavers for the Munro Review, Professor Eileen Munro attending many of the consultation sessions.

Children advised that the current rules give too many everyday decisions about children's lives to social workers rather than carers, and too many decisions for children have to be made at too high a level in social care services departments. Children in care have to have too many permissions for too many things from social care services – including going on sleepovers at friends' houses. And social workers did not make quick decisions.

Social workers should talk to children on their own when they visit, so the children feel free to talk. A third found they could always or nearly always get their wishes and feelings across to their social worker, and a quarter said their social worker always or nearly always took notice of their wishes and feelings. Half said their social worker did not usually take, or never took, notice of their wishes and feelings. Forty-five per cent said they could not usually or ever get their wishes and feelings across at their care reviews.

About a third of the children said their social workers were good at giving them information they needed, but around half said theirs were bad at giving children information. Seven out of 10 wanted to see their social workers more often. Under a quarter found it easy to get in touch with their social worker when they needed to.

Children could be moved from good placements for reasons that aren't to do with them or how the placement is going. Children living with their own parents don't get moved on to new families and 'dumped with strangers', but this can happen to a child in care several times in their lives.

If social workers or carers are consulting a sibling group, they usually ask the elder sibling, but not the younger ones whose views may be different.



**'You can't expect us to tell them things when we don't know them. Trust is something you build up'**

# Independent Reviewing Officers

*Children on Independent Reviewing Officers, July 2011*

For this report, we surveyed 1,530 children across 118 local authorities.

Seventy-one per cent of those who had an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) knew how to contact them, and one in eight had contacted them. The two jobs most expected of IROs by children in care were checking that the child is being looked after properly and running their review meetings. The tasks most often actually done by IROs were largely linked to review meetings. In order, they were running review meetings, making sure that reviews are done properly, making sure that things happen when reviews say they should, explaining decisions about care, keeping in contact between review meetings, and asking what the child thinks just before review meetings. The top two things IROs did really well were listening to children and chairing meetings well. The only thing IROs needed to do better was to be more available and easier for children to contact.

Close to half the children had only ever had one IRO; the others had experienced at least one change of IRO.

Over half said their IRO took part in most or all of the big decisions about their lives in care. Well over half considered that most or all of those big decisions were made in their reviews. But as many as 17% said that none of the big decisions in their care lives had actually been made in their reviews.

Seven out of 10 thought children in care do need an IRO as well as a social worker. An IRO was the next most important professional to have after a social worker. Those who needed an IRO most were those who had just come into care, children with a lot of personal problems, children whose social workers kept changing, and children who wanted one. Just over half thought children needed an IRO when they were changing placements.



Three tasks better done by IROs than by social workers were running review meetings, making sure reviews are done properly, and checking the council is doing what it should for the child. Four tasks children thought better done by social workers than by IROs were explaining decisions about care to the child, telling the child how to make a complaint, making sure the care plan is right for the child and asking the child what they think before each review meeting.

Out of children who gave their views on where IROs should work in the future, the clear majority voted for IROs to carry on working for the local council that provides children's services.

**'My IRO makes sure  
what is said is done'**

# The future Children's Commissioner

*The future Children's Commissioner, October 2011*

This report gave the views of 378 children on the future Children's Commissioner, following proposals at that time for the roles of Children's Rights Director and Children's Commissioner to be merged.

Six out of 10 agreed that the future Commissioner should have to pay special attention to the rights of children and young people who cannot live with their parents. Children in care have particular needs for help and support – but they are not the only ones who need attention to their rights and have individual problems. All need their rights protected, not only those living in care or away from their parents. 'We all need rights, not just us.'

Most agreed that the Commissioner should carry on the work the Children's Rights Director has been doing, though some worried that the workload and responsibility might be too much for just one person when there have been two so far.

Most wanted the Commissioner to carry on looking into individual cases and helping individual children as the Children's Rights Director has done, but perhaps the rule should be that the future Commissioner must look into individual cases for children in care or living away from home, but can look into the individual cases of other children.



There was general agreement that the future Commissioner should have 'young people' as well as 'children' in their title, should have an Advisory Board with children and young people on it, and that children and young people should be involved in the appointment of future Commissioners.

The future Commissioner should carry on giving children a say, by doing surveys of children and young people, holding events, doing visits to meet children and young people, holding local meetings with children and young people, using a website, and enabling children to contact them by email and on a helpline.

'Every child and young person has the right to be heard, has the right to be safe, and has the right to know what they are entitled to'

'We should chat to the candidates and see who listens to us best'



# Children's diaries of being looked after

*100 days of care*, November 2011

Unusually, this report presented 100 diary entries, submitted by 23 children and young people, giving their own experiences in their own words.

Their entries described hobbies, school, learning responsibility, relationships, friendships and quarrels, food and leisure. They showed the similarities and differences of life looked after in settings as different as children's homes, foster homes, boarding schools, residential special schools, and as care leavers.

Here are some extracts to give a flavour of the report.

'Did you know where I live was supposed to be respite for me but I didn't even know and I said that I wanted to stay with her long time as she was so nice to me. She is kind and caring and trusts me. People I knew who lived there they have always said to me make sure you respect her as she is a really good foster carer. She has a good laugh with you and you can tell she loves kids.'

'Alison wakes me up in the morning and then today I went to school and did what every other child does.'

'Who I live with is really nice and she doesn't have many rules. All the rules she has is go to bed at right time and behave.'

'You might have to realise that you need to follow rules that your carers make as you will maybe cause an argument and you won't make them happy.'

'You unfortunately have to ask to maybe dye your hair but don't go in a strop as they will never let you get it done.'

[From a disabled child] 'After school I came down to the wing and had a cup of tea then I went to Post 16 and wrote my diary. We made pancakes in club. Lots of fun. I tossed a cardboard pancake but Erin helped me just in case I hit myself with the pan.'

[From a young person in a secure unit] 'Why do I have to be HERE – I'm on welfare and done nothing wrong and others have broken the law.'

'I was having a great day until 4pm and my solicitor rang. Tanya explained that my upcoming court date could result to me having an extra 4 months added on to my 18 mth sentence with no early. I was devastated. I was empty, angry, worried. I didn't know what to do. It was unbelievable, I hadn't even done what I was being accused of. It felt like my heart was breaking. I felt extremely depressed and like I was on my own. I was angry at everyone, even though they had nothing to do with it. Later that evening I was in group work with Mac (not the dog, the human). We were focusing on gang culture and prevention of reoffending. Lunch was nicer than normal, a warm jacket potato with cheese and beans. Even though we have it every Tuesday it seemed nicer than last week!'

'Today has been challenging but I know every day will be the same, but I know all I have to do is breathe and calm down, but it ain't always easy. Jed yet again annoyed me. I wanted to hit him. I was in the situation of hit him and get restrained, or calm and stay out of trouble. Sometimes I wonder if hitting him would be worth it, but it ain't. Bin it! Night. Time 4 a shower.'



'Yikes! Stressful day at work. Terrible even. I'm so glad I'm home behind closed doors in my own quiet and silent environment.'

'I read a lot when I am stressed and worrying too much, it makes me feel calm and helps block out my surroundings for a short while. Sundays are the days I spend browsing for new books to swap.'

'She is loud enough for both of us! It's strange to say but although she is rather a noisy neighbour, I do welcome the sound – it makes me feel like I'm not totally alone on a night. Noise is good!'

'I got up again today at 7.45am. Same old same old not much happened except a couple of people messed around and got restrained. One lad got restrained for fighting with another lad. Another boy got restrained for threatening staff, he got took to his room. I've not done much, just at school, had some good lessons like PE and ICT.'

'I went to school. I came home, went to change because we have a review here. Then I went to laser quest and we played games. I won.'

'I came home still excited about the game and to my amazement my carer offers to buy a Chinese for winning the cup and the league. I quickly answer yes, and I sat and chilled. 6pm I watched a movie with my carer and we kicked back munching on the Chinese.'

'I didn't really have any homework to finish so in prep I watched a film on my iPod. After prep we all played dodge ball in the gym, this is the time when we can run off some steam. It was really fun. After this we all got ready for bed and had a wash. It's really annoying because there are only 2 showers that are warm. I am going to sleep now, we only got to bed at 10 o'clock at school, which is really late for a school night.'

# The children's homes charter

*Children's homes charter*, February 2012

This report gave the views of 260 children from children's homes on what should go into the government's proposed charter for children's homes.

Here are the top 10 items for the charter, selected from those being proposed according to the children's votes.

1. Children should be able to make choices about things like the food they eat and the clothes they wear.
2. Children should know how to make a complaint if they are unhappy about something.
3. Children can make choices about their social lives and can take part in leisure activities and activities taking place locally.
4. Children and young people are helped to move on in their lives towards independence. This includes things like learning to shop, cook, use washing machines and manage money.
5. Children are helped to go to school, take part in out-of-school activities, do their homework and do well at school.
6. Children should be listened to and their wishes and feelings should make a difference to what happens in the children's home.
7. Children should take responsibility for how they behave, in line with how old they are and their understanding.
8. Children should be offered help from an independent advocate if they want one.
9. Bullying is not acceptable. Staff take fast action to protect children from bullying.
10. Children are helped to be healthy and can get professional help with health issues whenever they need it.

The children wished to add six more items to the charter.

1. Staff should keep children safe in children's homes, including from bullying and being assaulted.
2. Children's homes should do more to promote children's contact with their families, including their siblings.
3. Children should have more say in what happens in the home.
4. Children should be allowed to have overnight stays in friends' houses without their parents needing to be police-checked first (which is not a requirement anyway).
5. Children in homes should have more freedoms, including going out alone.
6. Children should be allowed to play 18+ games.

# Learning independence

*Learning independence, May 2012*

For this report, young people who had recently left, or were due to leave, care, residential further education or boarding schools gave us their views about learning and preparing for independent adult life.

Many care leavers thought they had left care too early, without enough preparation. The majority of care leavers (61%) thought being in care had made their lives better, while a quarter thought it had made their lives worse. Care leavers felt little prepared emotionally for living alone and for loneliness after leaving care.

Young people leaving care, boarding school or residential college need more information about life outside school and care, and care leavers especially need more information about their entitlements and someone to call on readily for help and advice once they are on their own.

Young people leaving care, boarding school or residential college need more help with handling money and everyday practical skills such as cooking.

Young people living away from home in care, in boarding school or in residential college have a great deal done for them. Their main needs are met: items they need are provided, they are kept safe, and there are things to do with friends around. When they leave, they lose all this support and structure, and have to cope for themselves and deal with basic things that they had always been able to take for granted before.

Boarders about to leave school were most worried about having enough money, getting to university and getting a job.

Living away from home, in care or residential education, teaches independence, getting on with other people and getting to know yourself. For some, though, living away from home had not been a good experience and had not been right for them as individuals.

There is prejudice against people from care, so half of care leavers try to keep it a secret that they are from care.



During their time living away from home, care leavers had seen some improvements in personal support and listening to children, while boarders and residential college students had seen more emphasis on making living at school or college enjoyable, and on health and safety.

For those leaving care, boarding or residential college, future independent adult life is a daunting unknown.

**'Some worry about it,  
some fear it, others  
welcome it'**

# Guidance for doctors

*Children's views on guidance for doctors, July 2012*

This report summarises views on how doctors should keep children safe, given to feed in to the General Medical Council when they were developing new guidance.

Children advised that doctors should always tell the child if they are referring them to social care services, but needed to be careful about telling the child's parents as these might be harming the child and telling them about referral could increase the risks for the child.

Doctors should decide whether to pass on information about the child to other professionals if they are concerned for the safety of a child, based entirely on the safety of that child. They should not jump to conclusions about what has happened, should keep information confidential, passing it only to only those who need to know, should make sure the child knows what they are doing, and should tell the parents if they are sure enough that it is not they who are putting the child at risk. They should try to help the child and parents before referring them on to others, and if they want to ask other professionals to help the child or parents, they should ask the parents and child about this first, both separately and together. A doctor needs to be 'fairly sure' about the likely harm before passing information on.

Doctors should tell social care services if they believe a child is in danger, and they should tell teachers if they think they need to know something about a child to be able to look after them properly at school. They should give information to the police if they think the police need to take action to keep a child safe. If they genuinely believe that they need to pass on confidential information to protect a child from harm, then that is what they should do, even without the permission they would usually get for passing on other information or making other sorts of referral.

Children thought that drug or alcohol problems or violence in the family were the main factors that might alert doctors that a child might be at risk of harm at home.

It is important for doctors always to ask the child for their views whenever this is possible, giving the child a choice of ways to give their views and concerns, and taking plenty of time to talk with the child. In considering what a child says, the doctor should take into account the child's age, the child's understanding regardless of their age, whether the child goes on saying the same thing without keeping on changing their views, whether an adult is saying the same thing as the child, and whether the child can explain why they think what they do.

When explaining anything to a child, the doctor should explain at a level that is low enough for the child's age and understanding but high enough not to be patronising: 'Don't speak all doctor or if I don't understand I'll just agree.'

Doctors should tell children the full truth, and in talking to parents and children, should talk with and look at the child rather than just talking to the adult in the room. It is important to check that the child has understood: 'You're more anxious of the unknown.'

A doctor should always get a child's consent before examining them, and usually the parent's consent too if appropriate. If a parent and child disagree over this, or anything else, the doctor should hear both sides and

**'To be less intimidating and just say things the way they are. Doctors tend to twist things to make them sound less scary, but if you are a child it's best if you hear things right out'**





if possible put them together for their decision, but if that is not possible, they should give the bigger say to the child as the person who is their patient: 'Listen to the person that is sick.' If likely to be dealing with abuse, or a serious medical condition, a doctor may however still have to go ahead for the greater good of the child. Doctors should also weigh up the pros and cons of whether to see, or examine, a child alone. There are obvious risks, but equally a child may not talk freely with their parent present – either because the parent may be harming them, or they have a medical concern that they find embarrassing to discuss in front of a parent. Doctors should consider having a second health professional present to chaperone if needed.

Doctors working with children need to be the sort of doctor a child would feel comfortable with – being patient, concerned, happy, open, sensitive, good at listening and explaining things, and not a 'harsh' person. They need to take into account how a child might react to things like examinations if they have been abused in the past.

All doctors need to appreciate that having an injection is something most children fear, and so it is important to explain things to the child, help by telling the child where to look away, adjust how they do things to the

individual child's worries, and if appropriate, offer an anti-pain spray or cream. They should not dismiss or minimise a child's fear of needles.

There were three key requests from children about visiting doctors. First, children should not have to wait so long to get an appointment, and then the appointment itself should not be rushed or too short. Second, doctors should always give children a full and correct explanation of things, in understandable terms, and should always avoid giving a child false reassurances like saying, 'This won't hurt', when actually it will. Third was the importance of doctors getting a child's treatment right. Doctors need to be sure they are themselves comfortable with whatever they have done for a child, and that they have done things in the best way for the child's age and understanding.

Children also told us they wanted easier access to doctors to ask them for advice about problems of growing up, in ways that made young people feel able to ask about embarrassing things, and regular medical check-ups – including checking on anything about how they are growing that is worrying the child.

# Happiness

*Measuring happiness, July 2012*

*The Children's Happiness Scale, March 2014*

Following government interest in how people feel about their lives, alongside indicators of economic and social well-being, we developed a scale to measure how happy a child or young person might be on a given day.

Children we consulted defined happiness as one of the key emotions – the others were feeling sad, angry, excited, upset, frustrated, lonely, shy, anxious, afraid, embarrassed, guilty, joyful and annoyed. To the dictionary definition of happiness as 'feeling pleasure or contentment', they added other words to describe happiness, like 'joy', 'achievement' and being 'cool, calm and collected'. Happiness also meant being satisfied with how things are for you, being with people you want to be with, and not being depressed.

People are not born happy or unhappy sorts of people, but are made happy or unhappy by what happens to them. But people's backgrounds will tend to give them either chances or bad luck in life that are likely to make them happy or unhappy. So you 'can't be born happy, but can be born into happiness'.

Money can contribute to happiness, but cannot itself make you happy. A lot of what makes you happy is not about money – for example, family.

**'Happiness depends on themselves, depends on your life, parents, teachers – it could be a million things'**

Things that can make a child unhappy are lack of trust, being bullied, people being prejudiced against you, being treated unfairly, losing somebody who matters to you, not being cared for properly, being abused, not being listened to, being excluded from things, not being told things you need to know, and being let down by people who should be supporting you. For very young children, being looked after well and given good support are important, along with being able to explore and try out new things, being able to have some responsibility, being given attention, and having toys and plenty of things to do. Older teenagers are more likely to remember things that have happened to them and to be thinking about their future, which makes a lot of difference to how happy or unhappy they feel.

Many felt that children are becoming unhappier these days as life becomes more competitive, with higher expectations of children and young people, increasing pressure and examinations at school, and worries about the economy and recession.

Our children's happiness scale is based on children's views and judgements. We drew up a list of 100 statements proposed by children about feeling happy or unhappy, then asked 147 children and young people to judge on a rating scale how happy or unhappy they thought a child saying each of the statements would be. For our final list of 20 statements we picked those where our judges agreed most on their ratings, and which gave us a good range of statements from those scoring as very unhappy to those scoring as very happy. They are in random order – not in order of happiness score.

The final scale itself, and how to score it, is printed opposite.

The highest ('happiest') possible score is 4.25. The 'midway' score is 2.88. The lowest possible score (unless someone doesn't tick any of the items in the questionnaire at all!) is 1.68.

# Children's Happiness Scale

Developed by the Office of the Children's Rights Director for England, with children and young people in state care, receiving social care support, or living away from home in residential education.

February 2014

Here are 20 things children or young people might say about themselves. Just read each of them and tick all the ones that are right about you. Leave the others blank.

Life is good for me at the moment	<input type="checkbox"/>	3.64
I am treated fairly	<input type="checkbox"/>	3.13
I know what is happening next in my life	<input type="checkbox"/>	3.15
I have big problems but am dealing with them	<input type="checkbox"/>	2.55
I am quite proud of myself	<input type="checkbox"/>	3.65
I am trying to change some things about myself	<input type="checkbox"/>	2.57
I don't have any big problems at the moment	<input type="checkbox"/>	3.22
I have lots of friends	<input type="checkbox"/>	4.01
I get confused about what is going on	<input type="checkbox"/>	2.43
I never feel safe	<input type="checkbox"/>	1.74
I often get anxious	<input type="checkbox"/>	2.32
I get lonely	<input type="checkbox"/>	1.68
People are prejudiced against me	<input type="checkbox"/>	1.77
I learn from my mistakes	<input type="checkbox"/>	3.18
I am a shy person	<input type="checkbox"/>	2.63
I get bullied	<input type="checkbox"/>	1.68
I am good at learning new things	<input type="checkbox"/>	3.70
I am getting all the help I need	<input type="checkbox"/>	3.38
I have lots of fun	<input type="checkbox"/>	4.25
I am easily depressed	<input type="checkbox"/>	1.75

To find out your 'happiness score' on this questionnaire:

1. Add up the numbers next to all the items you have ticked

2. Next, write how many items you ticked

3. Now divide the number you wrote against (1) by the number you have just written against (2) and write the answer in the box

**That is your happiness score for today on this questionnaire!**





An unexpected finding was that the children and young people who judged our statements agreed more over things that tell us a child is unhappy, than about things that tell us a child is happy. This was statistically significant, so extremely unlikely to be a fluke. We are apparently measuring unhappiness, not happiness itself – happiness seemed to be more ‘not being unhappy’ than something separate in itself. Children in our discussions indeed agreed over things that usually made a child unhappy – but told us that what makes you happy is very individual to you.

To find out how children usually score on the scale, to give a standard for people to compare their own scores with, we had the scale filled in by 2,186 children and young people across my legal remit as Children’s Rights Director – that is, children in public care, children getting support from children’s social care services, children living away from home in all types of boarding schools and residential further education colleges, or living in residential special schools. It is important for people using this scale in the future to bear in mind that our figures relate to children in these groups.

The children’s happiness scale gives a score for how happy a child is feeling on the day they filled in the questionnaire. The average score for all 2,186 children and young people was 3.22. For boys it was 3.26, and

for girls it was 3.18. For children aged under 14, the average score was 3.25, and for young people aged 14 and over it was 3.15.

Among those in my remit, children in care scored very slightly lower (less happy) than those not in care, at 3.16 compared with 3.20. Children in foster homes scored slightly higher (happier) at 3.18 than children in children’s homes, who scored on average 3.08. Care leavers scored on average 3.01, slightly lower (less happy) than young people generally. Boarders in boarding schools scored an average of 3.22. Children in residential special schools averaged 3.18. Disabled children scored slightly lower than children generally, at 3.14.

Readers are free to use this scale if they wish, and to compare their scores with those above for children and young people in public care, supported by social care services, or living away from home. We have already learned of plans to use the scale to assess children’s well-being in one country outside the UK.

# Living in an out-of-area placement

*Living in an out of area placement, October 2012*

We asked children for their experience of being placed at a distance from their home area, to feed in to the review the government was then carrying out on out-of-area placements.

The negatives about being placed a long way from your home area were missing and losing contact with your family and your group of friends at home. The positives were that being placed at a distance could take you away from trouble you were getting into, or away from risks in your home area, and could stop you absconding back to familiar places and people there.

Whether an out-of-area placement was a good one depended much more on the staff and support you got than on how far it was from home.

Deciding whether to place a child out of area and at a distance should take into account the impact on the child's education, the impact of being parted more from their family, what contact arrangements there should be and how these can be kept going, whether the child agrees with the move and if not, the risk of them running from the placement, and the child's age, since younger children might find it harder to be separated from their family and home area.

There was a risk in out-of-area placements of losing contact with your social worker. It was difficult to replace visits with telephone contact, as many social workers are not easy for children to get hold of on the phone. Alongside this, your relationship with your social worker tended to get weaker.





# Independent visitors

*Independent visitors, October 2012*

We asked children in care for their experiences of independent visitors (volunteers who are appointed to befriend children in care who have little contact with their families).

Children in children's homes were the most likely to have an independent visitor, though the majority of children in children's homes did not have one. One in five care leavers were still in touch with independent visitors they had when they were still in care.

Three quarters of children with an independent visitor told us they had been given a choice about whether they wanted one or not. The most usual reason for not having an independent visitor was that one was never offered. Seventeen per cent of those without an independent visitor said this was because they had decided not to have one when this had been offered to them. Only one in five of those without an independent visitor thought they would say no if they were offered one. The main reason for turning down the offer of an independent visitor was simply not needing one.

One in five of those with an independent visitor said that they had been given a choice about the person they wanted to be their visitor. The most usual person to choose a child's visitor was their social worker.

Although the law links having an independent visitor to lack of family contact, children did not see an independent visitor as in any way linked to not having much family contact, or as making up for lack of family contact. However, children valued independent visitors as independent people who listen and help, rather than as people to take them out for activities, and rather than to make up for any lack of family contact.

Independent visitors often took children out and did activities with them. This is of course a way of keeping in touch and talking together, but being taken out and doing activities are not actually things that children especially wanted independent visitors for.

A good independent visitor is a good listener. The main worries about independent listeners were that they might not turn out to be someone the child gets on well with, and that having an independent person means having another person joining your life and knowing all about you.



# Sharing children's homes addresses

*Sharing children's homes addresses, January 2013*

We consulted children on government proposals to require Ofsted to make available the names and addresses of children's homes to the police and the Children's Commissioner.

On balance the children were more against than for sharing children's homes' names and addresses with the police to help them keep children in homes safer. They thought the information would help the police reduce drug risks in the area, but that staff knew of the risks of outsiders near the home and that they would contact the police anyway if needed. 'Police are always a phone call away, whether the police know [addresses] or not wouldn't make any difference. I'm very certain the police know where the children's homes are.'

They were unsure whether the police knowing where all children's homes were would in practice mean that children in homes could be rapidly eliminated from enquiries into local crimes, or that children in homes would automatically become the first suspects for local crimes. The majority were worried that if the police were given the names and addresses of the children's homes in their areas, they might be likely to target children in children's homes when crimes happened in the area.

There was support for there being a police agreement to only use the names and addresses of children's homes to keep children safer, and not to target children in homes if there were crimes in the area.

The majority of the children said the police never visit their children's home at present to help keep children there safe.

The children we asked were on balance more against than for the names and addresses of all children's homes being given to the Children's Commissioner. They accepted that this would help the Commissioner to ask for their views, but they felt they did not know



enough about the Commissioner to feel sure he or she would not use the information in different ways, like calling in on children's homes for other reasons.

There was concern that giving the names and addresses of children's homes to either the police or the Children's Commissioner should never be allowed to lead to giving them the names of the children living in them as well.

# Keeping out of trouble

*Keeping out of trouble, April 2013*

This report gave the views of 187 children and young people, including 96 in secure training centres, on why children and young people get into trouble, and how they can avoid trouble.

The worst sorts of trouble were (in order) committing murder, other criminal offences, drugs, drinking and smoking, getting involved in gangs, debt, and getting pregnant. Those in secure training centres saw the worst crimes as (again in order) murder, sexual offences, violence and assault, theft, arson, gun and knife crime, and drug-related crime. Worst sorts of crime were usually those that involved harming people. Especially serious were crimes that had a big impact on the victim or their family, and crimes that involved doing something horrible or disgusting to someone.

A third of those in secure training centres said there were no sorts of crime that didn't really matter at all. Generally, crimes against property, such as theft, shoplifting and criminal damage, were seen as mattering less than crimes against people. Crimes could also be serious for yourself if they were ones you were under pressure from others to commit, or they were likely to have serious consequences for you.

**'You'd do whatever to be in that group rather than be bullied'**

In the experience of those in secure training centres because they had committed offences, the most likely crimes for a young person to commit were, in order of likelihood, robbery, burglary, violence or assault, theft, and taking drugs.

Because lots of crime is committed because of peer pressure, young people are more likely to commit a crime when they are in a group or gang than on their own.

The top three things most likely to keep young people from getting into trouble and committing crimes were having local activities and places to go, having a job, and getting government help. Projects and activities that give responsibility, and involvement with sports, improve chances of getting a job, and simply keep children off the streets, were important. But activities shouldn't be so expensive to take part in that young people have to make up their own entertainments on the streets instead.

Positive support from your family is also vital in keeping a child or young person out of trouble. Other factors that help deter young people from committing a crime are the likelihood of getting caught, having a criminal record and realising how that might affect getting a job in the future, and having sufficient welfare benefits not to start committing crimes for living. Having your benefits stopped could lead directly to you stealing things.

Being given guidance, having support groups, and help from CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) could be important in stopping someone committing more crimes. Having somebody to talk to and be guided by was important.

The police getting more involved in activities with children and young people could help. So could police visiting schools and children's homes more to get themselves known and teach children about safety and risks. Some said that being stopped by the police if they hadn't committed an offence could make them more likely to commit an offence anyway.

Schools and colleges can help keep children and young people out of trouble by motivating them to have high aspirations and helping them to achieve them. Vulnerable children and young people need help to counter peer pressure and help them build good relationships with friends, parents and organisations that can support them. Being in the right group of friends is important to whether you commit crimes or not. Knowing right from wrong at a young age, and knowing the consequences, are important in putting young people off committing crimes.

For those in care, too many changes of social worker, and social workers being too busy, meant less help to young people in care to keep out of trouble.

Things that might put you off continuing to commit crimes once you had started included being able to make some mistakes, but being helped to learn from them, and having counselling. If you were in care, you also had to learn to shrug off being put down so often as someone from care.

What got young people into trouble with the law was peer pressure, boredom, with little else to do, and progressing from being involved on the edges of crime with friends into becoming fully involved. Sometimes it was wanting to belong and fit into a group and be respected by the others in the group, and sometimes a young person was bullied by others into committing crimes in a group. Members of some groups start breaking the law in minor ways for fun, for a 'buzz', but then progress to worse law-breaking to keep in with their group of friends. Wanting money is the key for some, and the combination of being bored and wanting money leads many into crime.

Those in secure training centres because of crimes they had committed said that the main factors that had led them into crime were, in order, gangs and peer pressure, getting money, drugs and drink, being bored, to have fun or get a 'buzz', and stress or anger. Well over twice as many of the young people in secure training centres said that peer pressure, including in gangs, led them into breaking the law as said it was to have fun or for a 'buzz': 'People do it to fit in or get respect.'

In our consultations we heard that people care more about what they do as they grow older, but when you are young you want to live life to the full – and for some, that leads to getting into trouble, which you will eventually stop as you get older.

Children most likely to get into trouble were those with unstable family lives, those who are poor or deprived, and children in care. Children who have always been made to feel they are not worth much are very likely to get into trouble. You feel that nothing much good is expected of you, you don't need to try, and getting into trouble is what people expect of you.

The great majority thought that young people are not born criminals – they become criminals. Your family and other background can make this likely or unlikely, but even then becoming a criminal does not automatically follow – you can choose for yourself not to follow others into trouble: 'Depends on your family business. My uncle is a burglar but I'm not.'

Almost two thirds of those in secure training centres thought their time in the centre made them less likely to commit any crimes after they left.

The great majority of those we consulted thought that young people their age were getting more likely to commit crimes.

**'Everyone's got a path –  
you need determination  
to prove people wrong'**

# Changing children's homes

*Changing children's homes*, December 2013

This report gave the views of over 600 young people in children's homes on government proposals for future changes in homes.

Children supported most of the government proposals. They supported more responsibility on children's homes to keep children safe, including keeping the child safe in every statutory review, and checking the safety of the location of children's homes, both generally and on making placements out of home area. They agreed with independent monitoring visitors to homes, checking placement suitability for individual children with the local authority before placing out of area, including prevention of running away in homes' policies, and reviewing the care plan of any child who frequently runs away. They supported government proposals for the police to carry out a 'safe and well' interview with each child who is found after running away, and for each child returning from running away from a children's home to have an interview with an independent person.

On balance, children supported the Director of Children's Services having to agree any care plan for a child to leave care at 16 or 17.

Children favoured a definition of a distant placement as one that is more than two hours' travelling time away.

Children were concerned that the final decision on distant placement should not be made by the Director of Children's Services, but by a panel of those who know the child. The key role of the Director of Children's Services in decision-making on distant placement should be one of being satisfied that the decision has been properly made by those who know the child, in accordance with the child's safety and needs, taking the child's wishes and feelings into account.

The most frequent reasons for distant placement were to remove the child from trouble and risks in their home area and to prevent them running back to the family home they had been removed from. Children in distant placements considered (by 49% to 6%) that distant placement made them safer rather than less safe.

Inspectors should check whether social workers are doing what they should for children in distant placements, are keeping in contact with them, and are helping them to keep in touch with their families. The top priority for inspectors checking how safe children are in a children's home is to talk directly with the children there.

All children in care should themselves be able to call for a review of their case if they do not feel safe or for any other reason. (This children's proposal was accepted by the government and is now enacted in law.)

A children's home should be closed straight away if there is abuse, neglect or violence towards the children, if the staff are not good enough to look after the children, or if the environment of the home or the area is bad for children. But it may need to stay open long enough to find best next placements for the children.

The children's own list of what makes a children's home a good children's home is set out in the box below.



## Children's criteria for a good children's home

- Staff are caring and kind, good at communicating with children, and have a sense of humour.
- Staff are trained in working with children, behaviour management, first aid and safeguarding.
- The manager is caring and kind, approachable by children, and firm but fair.
- Staff talk with and listen to children, spend time with children and do activities with them, and get to know the children.
- The building is big, homely, clean, has good facilities both inside and outdoors, and is well maintained, safe and secure, preferably in a rural area, but where it is nice, quiet and safe.
- The security of the building, care by the staff, staff training and policies and procedures, all work to keep children safe from danger and abuse in the home itself.
- Staff supervision and support of children, and making children aware of dangers to their safety, keep children safe in the streets around the home.
- Staff support children, children feel happy and safe in the home, there are good activities, and children don't want to run away.
- When children come back from running away, staff find out why they ran, and react positively towards them.
- There is a good diet, exercise and medical checks to keep children healthy.
- Staff support children in their school or college work, and help with homework.
- Staff support and encourage children in their hobbies, find out what each child would like to do, let children try new hobbies and make sure each child has choices of hobbies and activities.
- Children are supported, encouraged and helped to keep in contact with their families if they want to (and if it is not dangerous to them), can keep in touch by phone or by visits, and if necessary staff help by accompanying them or arranging transport.
- Children are given independence training and training in cooking, and staff support them to become independent in the future.
- Children's views are asked and taken notice of in meetings, in key worker sessions, and by staff generally asking and listening to children's views.
- Rewards and punishments are based on incentives and natural consequences.

# Telling hospital staff who's in care

*Telling health staff who is in care, March 2014*

We consulted 40 children in care about government proposals to enable health staff in hospitals or ambulance services to see from their NHS computer system whether a child they are seeing is in care or has a child protection plan.

Most supported emergency health staff knowing whether a child is on a child protection plan, so that they are aware and can help to keep the child safe and know the child is at risk. There were however some concerns – that health staff might overreact when it was not necessary, or make assumptions that the child was at risk from the person they were with in outpatients when that might be wrong. There were also concerns about privacy issues and the computer data possibly being wrong or out of date.

There was much less support for health staff knowing whether a child is in care. On balance the children consulted supported this in order to help staff provide the right treatment for the child, keep the child safe and know who to contact. They also thought that it might help health staff to understand and make allowances for some children because of their care background. But more had concerns about this proposal. The privacy issues were greater because a child in care is much less likely to be at risk of any harm than those on child protection plans, and given that there are lots of prejudices and misunderstandings about children in care, labelling a child as in care could well lead to wrong assumptions being made, the child being stereotyped as 'child in care', and not being treated the same as other children would be. 'You should not be treated any differently just because you are in care'.

There was strong support for doctors and nurses in Accident and Emergency departments knowing if a child was on a child protection plan, and support (though slightly less) for out-of-hours GPs and ambulance staff knowing. There was still support



for doctors and nurses in Accident and Emergency departments knowing who was in care, but less (though still overall support) for out-of-hours GPs and ambulance staff knowing this.

Just over half the children consulted would also have supported health service emergency staff knowing if any child they were seeing in an emergency had a social worker.

# Children's meetings with Ministers

Since 2010 we have held meetings between children and government Ministers, for the children to give their views directly to Ministers and for Ministers to ask children for their views directly on key topics they are dealing with in the Department for Education or in parliament. This section lists the main points made by children directly to Ministers at these meetings.

## Fostering

- Best about being fostered is feeling at home in a family unit, having new opportunities and new things to do, and being able to talk to someone you trust.
  - Worst about being fostered is being stereotyped as a child in care, being separated from siblings, not always having a good relationship with other children (other foster children or the foster carers' own children), not always having a say in your future care and moving placements.
  - Foster children can be given privileges and help at school that other children don't get – but can be bullied for being in care, and can be made to 'stand out' as different in the way they are treated at school.
  - Good foster carers treat foster children like their own children, and keep pressures on social care services or schools for things their foster children need.
  - Foster children want to feel 'normal' like any other child.
  - Foster carers having to get permission from social care services for things other children's parents can decide, like going on sleepovers, makes you different.
  - Giving foster carers more support can help avoid placements breaking down.
  - Foster carers should also have more say than social workers in many decisions about children in their care – they know the child better than social workers do.
- Children wanted a proposed foster carers' charter to include getting to know the child before decisions are made about placement, carers being given more information about the child and the child more information about the placement before they move in. It should include foster carers always treating all children in the family equally whether they are foster children or their own, and social care services and carers always talking to the child concerned before making any decision. They wanted the charter to say that social care services and foster carers should respect how each foster child can be very different from others, and that carers should not try to change foster children's differences. They also wanted it to say that services and carers should keep children informed of what is happening and keep their information confidential. The charter should cover not making foster children stand out at school by holding meetings about them there, giving quality time to every child even if others have greater needs or problems, and respecting a child's past.
  - Allow children to stay with their carers after they reach 18.

## Children's homes

- Best about living in a children's home were money allowances (though these varied a lot), freedom, trips and activities, having your own bedroom, good food, and meeting new people and living with people from different cultural backgrounds.
- Worst about living in a children's home were rules and procedures, staff checking your room, personal belongings sometimes being confiscated, personal electrical property being subject to 'portable appliance tests' with test stickers stuck on them, not being allowed to bring some personal items into the home with you, your friends' parents having to be police-checked before you could stay overnight (which they don't have to be), being looked after by lots of different people, being constantly monitored, being more likely to be moved if you run away than

you would be in a foster home, and standing out at school because of problems getting money to take to school for trips and activities.

- Good children's home staff care for you, are well matched to the children they are looking after, are fun to be with and not too serious, can share your interests, enjoy activities, aren't too old, can drive, are flexible and not over-strict, understand what it is like for the children, cope with things without calling the police, and know how to calm children down before they 'kick off'.
- Kitchen doors should not be locked to stop children getting snacks for themselves.
- The culture of a children's home can be changed by admission of a young person just out of a secure unit.

### The children's homes charter

Discussing the items the Government proposed for a children's homes charter, children proposed the following items and exclusions.

- The introduction to the charter should say that the responsibility for making what is in the charter happen for children is not just with children's homes staff, but with social workers, managers and all social care staff who are involved with any child in the home.
- Don't include all the things that should happen in any 'OK home' – like children having choices of food to eat and clothes to wear, or staff helping the children – a charter should contain things that would make a home brilliant.
- If children's views are not going to be acted on, always tell the children why.
- Children should only be punished reasonably, in line with what they have done.
- Only individual children should be punished – no group of children should ever be punished for what one child has done. If you have to restrict something for one person because of their behaviour, those restrictions should not apply to or affect the other children living in the home.

- Decisions about children's everyday lives should be made by their care staff without having to refer back to their social workers.
- Care staff in a children's home should make the decision whether a child can stay at a friend's house overnight, with no need for any police checks (which there don't have to be).
- Children themselves should have the biggest say in when they are ready to leave the home.
- Physical restraint must only be used on a child to stop them injuring themselves or someone else or to stop serious damage to property, and never for any other reason such as to punish a child or to make the child do what they are told.

### Adoption

- Best about being adopted was having new parents and being part of a new family with new siblings, and the support of your new parents.
- Worst about being adopted were problems at school, separation and lack of contact with your birth family, finding it hard to get information about your past, other people's lack of understanding about adoption, and not getting support for problems arising or continuing after your adoption.
- It is important how you first met your new adoptive family – going on trips, visits or activities together are often the best first meetings.
- Support from carers and social workers is important when being adopted and after you have been adopted.
- Teachers and other children don't know enough about adoption and what it is. Teachers often misunderstand and keep asking questions. Other children can tease and bully you and make damaging comments that you weren't wanted by your birth parents. There needs to be more public awareness, teacher training, and information for children generally (for instance in PHSE) about what

adoption is. And allowances need to be made when an adopted child reacts strongly to being teased or bullied about being adopted.

- Many try to keep it a secret that they are adopted, and worry that people like teachers won't keep it confidential – some teachers don't.
- Adopted children should not have to lose contact with their birth families and especially their birth brothers and sisters, and should be given information about how they are doing. Wondering and worrying how they are can otherwise cause continuing anxiety.
- Adopted children should have medical information about health issues that run in their birth families and so may affect them.
- Try to keep brothers and sisters together, and if that is not possible, help them to stay in contact.
- You should be told why you were adopted rather than staying with your birth family, and why you had to be separated from any siblings you are no longer living with.
- You should wherever possible have the chance to meet your birth parents when you are old enough to cope with this – but meeting is not right for everyone and can cause problems for some.
- Both adopted children and adoptive parents carry on needing support long after the adoption itself. Problems don't go away once someone is adopted, and often they start after the adoption.

### The adoption charter

Discussing the items the government proposed for their adoption charter, children proposed the following items and exclusions.

- Keep brothers and sisters together in adoption.
- Help adopted children with any problems of being an adopted child.
- Consider adoption as a *possibility* for children coming into care.

- Do not require children to be adopted by people of the same race and religion.
- Do not say you should always keep adopted children in touch with their birth families – that is right for some, not others, and should be decided by what is best for the individual child.
- Have a long enough trial period with proposed adopters for the child to form a clear view, and ask the child for their views on their own before any decision is made.
- Do not 'advertise' children for adoption, so they can be picked for their looks.
- Adoption should be faster where this is right for the child, but must take the time needed to get it right. Doing things quickly doesn't make things right.
- How early in life a child is adopted should depend on the child's needs and be decided for the individual.
- Training should be available for adoptive parents: 'Taking a kid on, it's not easy.'

### Sibling separation and contact

- Siblings should never be separated in care, unless they have needs that cannot be met in the same placement (for example, one has a special medical need or needs specialist support), one is a danger to their siblings, they are of very different ages and one will be leaving care well before the other, the care plans are too different to be in the same placement, or the siblings don't want to be placed together.
- Splitting siblings up breaks close family bonds, can be seen by a child as a punishment, and can have negative emotional effects.
- Being placed with a sibling helps both when they come into care – they can support each other through a very difficult time. It can also help you keep your family, religious and cultural identity, and having brothers or sisters with you makes you feel more like a normal child even though you are in care.



- If siblings have to be separated in an emergency admission, the plan should be to bring them back together as soon as possible.
- Siblings get separated in different placements for no good reason to do with their needs, wishes or feelings, but because of placements being rushed when better planning could have kept them together.
- Having a sense of family is important. Keeping contact with relatives beyond parents and siblings can be vital – including grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins.
- Contact often gets lost for no good reasons other than something like visiting and travel arrangements going wrong and not being rearranged. Travel and distance can lead to loss of contact – but work needs to be done to avoid that happening. Often contact just gets less frequent until it stops.
- Supervised contact is always difficult – you don't talk easily to your siblings or your parents with someone staring at you. Contact should only be supervised if there are real continuing safety risks to meeting unsupervised.
- Sleepovers with siblings are good – but often hit the issue of social workers saying that they can't happen without police checks (which is not the case).
- Contact with siblings should be possible after the separate adoption of one or more – but the level and type of contact should depend on the wishes, age and understanding of each of the siblings.
- Contact with birth families should be kept under review – a child might want to increase or decrease the contact.
- Letters don't really count as contact – and are hard if you don't know someone well any longer through meeting or talking together.
- Personal situations are complicated – you cannot apply fixed rules about contact to every situation.

### Education of children in care

- If you are struggling with reading, you should be given age-specific things to read – not books written for much younger children.
- Your own motivation is vital in how you do at school.
- The help you get at home depends very much on the carers you have got.
- Personal Education Plans don't really work when teachers and social workers come and go.
- Educational help often comes too late, when a crisis point has been reached.
- Where young people in care can live during university or college holidays needs sorting, as they do not have a family home to return to like other students.
- Information about entitlements from government initiatives, such as bursaries, is not reaching children in care and their local workers, so they often miss out on what the government has said they should be getting. Children, social workers and benefits offices need to be told more about entitlements such as those to support the education of children in care and care leavers.
- Most have heard the term 'designated teacher', but few knew who theirs was and what they did. Again, social workers and others need to get that information out to children in care.
- There is some concern that a designated teacher being involved with you risked identifying you as a child in care at school and opening you up to curiosity, teasing and bullying by others.
- Children in care need to have support at school which is confidential and doesn't make them stand out from everyone else as being in care.
- Changing schools on changing placements can be a good or bad thing, socially or for your education, but its timing in your school career and where you are in relation to courses and examinations can make all the difference too.



### Further points about being in care

- It is important to have a stable placement which becomes 'your place', as long as it is working OK for you.
- Many want just to 'fit in' and not be seen to be different, as a child in care.
- Teachers sometimes tell a class that a child is in care when that child is trying to keep it a secret – not for the first time, we were told of a teacher saying something in front of the class like 'Your social worker is here to see you.'
- Having to move placements is a worst thing about care – made even worse if things are uncertain and you are not told what is happening and why, if the move is rapid, if the social worker just expects you to go and not ask questions, and if you don't know anything about the people who are going to take you over.
- Two other worst things about being in care are your first night away from home in care with strangers, and being treated like a 'case' rather than an individual.
- A good social worker listens and understands what you want, fights for what you want to happen to you, has a good relationship with your birth family, and finds out and does what is best for you.
- A bad social worker doesn't know what you need, tells you examples from their own childhood to tell you what you should be like, doesn't spend enough time with you, doesn't develop a good relationship with you, fails to keep appointments with you, doesn't keep your information confidential enough, uses jargon you can't understand, and doesn't pass on important information.
- Having to have your friends' parents police-checked before you can go for sleepovers is one of the worst things about being in care (as well as not being a requirement from any government).

- Changes of social worker are very difficult for a child in care, and mean new social workers make decisions without really knowing you first. How the changes are handled also matters a lot – it causes you problems if your old social worker just leaves without doing a hand-over about you and your plans to your new one.
  - Comparing foster care and children’s homes, foster care gives you a family setting, but children’s homes mean you are with others in care who have gone through problems like you have, where you don’t feel isolated and different. Children’s homes and foster care are both needed: children’s homes ‘aren’t just for people who can’t be fostered; some people don’t want a family placement’.
  - Experience of Independent Reviewing Officers was mixed – some had received excellent support, while others hadn’t heard of IROs.
  - Giving foster carers accommodation would help to recruit more of them.
  - The most important thing for a child in care is getting their placement right for them.
- Younger children on being in care**
- Points made particularly by children under 12 were the following.
- In care you get more opportunities, more help, more care than at home, more activities, and are kept safer and looked after properly: ‘They do what Mum and Dad can’t do, but they can.’
  - The worst thing about being in care is not being with your family and not seeing them much. Many had no ‘worst thing’ to say about being in care.
  - As other children had said, a bad thing about being in care was not being allowed to go on sleepovers at friends’ houses as their parents hadn’t been police-checked (even though this is not a government requirement).
  - Social workers were appreciated as someone to talk to, but some felt they weren’t always interested in you and didn’t always listen fully to your views. Sometimes social workers were late for visits and meetings, they didn’t always call you back when you left messages for them, and you usually had to wait a long time before you could talk to them about something you really wanted to discuss straight away.
  - Most thought their social worker visited them often enough, and almost all said they did get to speak to their social worker alone without anyone else listening.
  - Only one child in the group said they did have a care plan, knew and agreed with what was in it, and that their care plan was being kept to.
  - Most had no choice of placement last time they had been moved, and half the group had a week or less notice before they moved, but most had visited their new placement before moving in.
  - Most placement moves had turned out to be right for them, but didn’t feel like that at the time because they were moved suddenly and to places and people they didn’t really know.
  - Many had extra help at school because they were in care. This ranged from getting extra tuition to someone checking daily whether they needed any help or support. Although the extra help was welcomed, it could make you stand out as being in care.
  - Standing out from others at school because you are in care is a major problem. Other children get inquisitive and start asking about parents because they have never seen them. As we had heard in other consultations, teachers can let out the fact that you are in care when you have been keeping it a secret – for instance saying in front of the class that your ‘carers’ would have to be asked about sleepovers, or telling the rest of the class, ‘Go easy on her, she’s in care.’

- Most had been bullied for being in care, though friends usually became supportive once they knew the facts.
- Half the group had an Independent Reviewing Officer, others either hadn't or didn't know whether or not they had one.
- Six out of 10 said being in care was a good thing – the others said it was not a bad thing, but was a mixture of good and bad.

### Special guardianship

Children living under special guardianship (a special kind of legal order) made the following points.

- There is a lack of recognition of special guardianship and people need to know more about it.
- Children under special guardianship shouldn't be called by a special term, they are 'just children' – but if you have to have a term, it should be 'guardian child'.
- The age at which the children had been taken into special guardianship ranged from two to 13.
- Eight out of the group of 13 had been in care immediately before coming into special guardianship. Nine said they had been given a choice about whether they wanted a special guardianship order for their care.
- Best things about special guardianship were being with 'family', plenty of contact with your birth family, feeling more 'normal' than being in care, not being pulled out of class at school for social care meetings, and having more security.
- It can take too long to get a special guardianship order granted.
- A worry is whether social care services have checked enough that the placement really is right for the child – unlike placements in care, you can't easily move on if things don't work out. A good trial period would help here: 'You can't go back on it, so make sure it's right for the children.'
- Special guardians can have a conflict of interest between the child and the child's birth parent – for example, if your grandmother is your special guardian, she still has feelings for the parent you aren't living with, because they are her child, as well as for you as her grandchild and guardian child. This can lead to disagreements over how you are being brought up.
- The young people in the group felt they had not received enough support while living with their special guardian. None had an allocated social worker they could contact, though some (not all) special guardians had a 'link worker' or attended 'family and friends' meetings.
- A particular worry is lack of support and advice when guardian children approach the age of 18, when their special guardianship order ends. Some had no idea what would happen to them at that point. What actually happens when the order ends had never been explained. Some thought their orders ended at 18, while one young person said he had been told his ended at 16. Young people worried about leaving the placement and finding somewhere to live.
- Some special guardians were given financial help, but the children didn't think this was enough – though it was right that special guardians shouldn't be paid for caring.
- The group saw the main difference for them between special guardianship and adoption as not changing your name, and not losing contact with your brothers and sisters if you were in special guardianship.
- Some try to keep their special guardianship a secret at school, to avoid upsetting curiosity and questions. One had been bullied for being in special guardianship.
- Monitoring and reviewing how a special guardianship placement is going for the child should be done much more. Only two in the group had ever had review meetings as guardian children.

## The last children's rights message of all...

**'Take every  
child seriously'**





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