



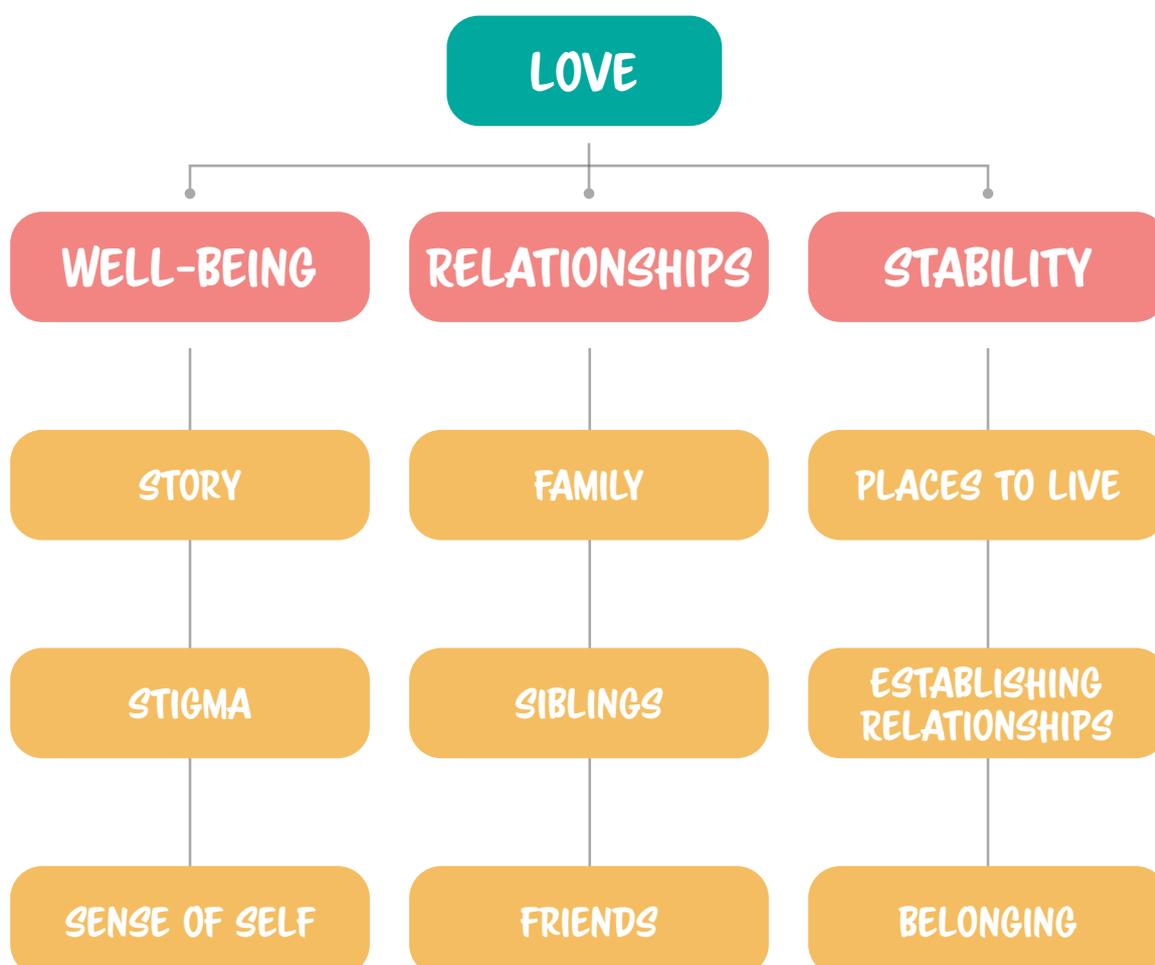
Listening to care experienced young people

Since June 2021 we have been engaging care experienced children and young people, mostly between the ages of 10 and 25. There has been engagement with care experienced adults but for the purposes of this summary we are focused on those who are below the age of 25, because they have the most recent experience of the care system and moving into adulthood.

What have we learned?

Children and young people were invited to share as much as they felt comfortable to do so in our engagement sessions. We have learned from their openness and willingness to talk about difficult and often stigmatising aspects of their lives. The stories we heard amplify what has been shared over the years by other care experienced people, those that have been shared by groups, individuals, and organisations. The review team recognises that the system children and families find themselves in needs to change so that we do not rely on care experienced people sharing their stories again.

Figure 1: Themes from engagement with children and young people





About children and their wellbeing:

Above all, children highlighted the importance of being listened to and feeling treated fairly. Their comments and experiences reflect how well they have been able to realise their rights. The action of listening to children for this review aimed to exercise their right to be listened to about matters affecting them (Article 12, UNCRC, 1991).

Children and young people told us positive aspects about being in care, they were safe, some told us that they had stable homes and good relationships with their carers and social workers.



I've not really had any problems with being in care

I still live with my foster carers because I'm in staying put. When my PA came round they always ask if there's been any problems, because I haven't had any problems for 10 years.

I've not moved around - this is my first and last placement.

Everyone's really nice. There's not loads of staff so you can connect to the staff one to one. All relatable – they try to get on your level.

I loved my children's home – I would've stayed there forever if I was allowed.

There are other positive outcomes where children have gained university degrees and employment, have their own families, and are thriving. They mention key relationships, people who went over and above their role, those they could lean on when extra support was needed and not forgetting their own strength and drive to achieve their dreams.



One person went above and beyond, checking other people were doing their jobs like they should.

The key elements for positive experiences of children's social care have been:

- Love and positive relationships with a consistent care giver
- A stable place to live
- Understanding and knowing their story and reason for being in care
- Having a good relationship with a social worker or personal adviser
- Consistent education
- Hope and aspiration for the future
- A positive relationship with family or extended family.

However, being in contact with children's social care is complex. It can provide protections in one sense but also produce other issues:

“ Being in care was life changing. Every aspect of my life is still affected by it. I don't think there is enough time to process all the trauma before you leave care and all the stress and headaches come back. Obviously care kept me safe and provided opportunities I would have never had, however it also separated my family and 4 of my siblings have been adopted with only a yearly vague letter for correspondence. I don't understand why I get punished for my mother's mistakes.

I think people assume that children are getting their basic needs, it's enough. Like you know they've got food and shelter... OK, they're better off than where they used to be, and you as a child you do have that mindset you're like, oh, I'm better than where I used to be, so it's OK, but that those basic needs aren't necessarily enough.

There is a stigma attached to being in care or on a child protection plan that is hard for children and young people to dismiss and overcome, some responses reflect a resignation to the perception others have of care. It has an effect on the well-being of children with experience of children's social care.

“ Everything is blamed on me because I am in care because they say I'm struggling

Once I told someone I was in care and he told everyone in the class so everyone kept asking if I was adopted

The labels of being in care piss me off – people assume I am bad or certain things about me just because I am care-experienced

I'm known as a bad kid because I'm in Residential not Foster

If you're in a residential home and some children are on Section 20 and others full care orders. It's an odd situation - It's almost like you want to know who to lay the blame on for being in care – is it the kid or the family. Laying the blame on a side causes more problems than solutions. It's a way of othering the family or othering the young person. And then you don't have to deal with them

Young people highlighted education as the area they felt stigmatised. They reported that there were key individuals who have supported them and who they could trust but they were frustrated with being called out of class for Personal Education Plan (PEP) meetings or check ins. When school staff approached them in break times when they were with friends, this was also challenging and meant that they had to give an account for their personal circumstances.

Some children face further stigma and disadvantage in addition to the stigma associated with being in care,

“ | Diversity and Inclusion is vital to ensure young people are seen, welcomed, heard and valued.

- Children and young people who are part of the LGBTQ+ community:

“ | People are very worried about coming out because they will be judged by professionals and carers in the system.

Local authorities will say that they have not been told from young people that they are LGBTQ+ and have used this to justify why they have not identified additional support for young people. There needs to be more support to encourage young people to 'come out' to ensure they can get the right support from young people.

Pronouns are used incorrectly, when children and young people change their name, the professionals do not take on these new references in their files.

I had social workers that never wanted to speak about LGBTQ+ or my sexual abuse, like CSE, they would change the topic. When I complained about it, I was told it was because of their religion they couldn't talk about it, but like don't be a social worker if you can't talk about abuse.

- Those with black or ethnic minority backgrounds who live in homes where there is not enough cultural knowledge.

“ | You learn to be adaptable because you are placed in different families who have different cultures and religious beliefs.

Local authorities should think about the young person's culture and background before they agree a placement, sometime young people are placed in unsuitable areas. I was placed in a racist area and I was injured.

- Disabled children and young people, who sometimes face challenges getting the support they need, being able to express their sexuality or gender identity, being listened to and accessing appropriate housing.

“ | When I was 17 they tried to put me in supported living. It was horrible for me going from a family home to independence, I need more support because I have autism.

The houses that do accept housing benefit are not necessarily suitable, I am disabled and have a pet that provides me with emotional support, many tenancies do not accept pets.

Young people not being believed due to them being neurodivergent.

Not being believed due to a disability.

Young people recognise that they need help and support to understand the reasons for them being in care and with their own identity and family heritage and culture

“ **Being in care is one of the most life changing experiences, depending on when you go in the support needed for the yp is essential.**

It would help young people in care to have information shared with them about their heritage, background, family and where they've come from.

So, I have a life story book and a memory box which I know a lot of social workers do. That sort of helped me with that because I moved around a lot. So, I was born in a very to deprived suburb of [a city] and I now live in a middle class suburb of [a different city] and there's not that identity that often comes with your region or class or with some people with ethnicity. And as well as losing that first family and getting moved around to different foster carers before being adopted, you're moving around the country and it's quite hard to know who you are or who you're supposed to be. So, a lot of people find their identity through things that are there for them, but when you're a child who's in care, you have to make your own identity, which is quite a difficult task.

It is important for children's own sense of identity to understand their story in an age-appropriate way, many care experienced adults told us that they did not get that support as a child and spend a long time as an adult coming to terms with this. Children expressed this by telling us they didn't know why they were in care, that they wanted to understand more and have a voice in the conversations had about them.

Young people told us about the impact of the absence of a clear understanding of their story and what this means for their identity.

“ **It can have an odd effect – it's a bit like, if you're in a placement and have 6 different social workers coming in and out. It's like who are you? Who are you here for?**

Particularly at a younger age, young people in care can have lots of questions about their background which they don't have the answers to. Being given as much information as possible about this could help young people in care understand themselves and potentially connect with people that could have a positive impact on their lives such as extended family.

I think in my experience when I went into care, it was an overnight thing and I don't even know why I was there or what I was doing there... I was really young. I was like 8 or 9 but no one really explained anything. So actually I would like block this bit outside memory but I actually went into care when I was six and I was taken out care. But then it was, it just happened like all of a sudden and no one really explains anything to you or tells you what's going on with your parents. Or like I never went back... I ended up moving around care.

They try and tell you about you, they try and tell me about my life and past but they don't even know me, they've been told like a little statement and they think they know what's happened in my life. It wasn't always bad, there was little hiccups but then they're making judgements about my parents.

Although there are story telling procedures in place, many participants highlight that this is not done well enough across the system, and where it is inadequate it has a life-long impact.

Access to mental health and emotional support was also strongly advocated for throughout our conversations. Often children and young people told us that they did not have enough support and being referred to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) was challenging. However, it's important to say that this is not the case across the board and some young people reported good and reliable support.

Relationships

Relationships are a vital part of childhood and one relationship highlighted by children is that with brothers or sisters. Some siblings are placed together and this is often the preference of the young people as it maintains some tight familial bonds. However, others are separated, some going to different foster homes or children's homes, whilst others are permanently separated through adoption. When this happened one young person said:

“ | You have nothing left.

The current system does not always enable brothers and sisters to stay together and is not transparent in why that is. This has long term effects on children's well-being.

“ | It is like that with siblings we are only allowed an hour and half but supervised and other people get 6 hours and it is really hard when everyone around you brags about their family and it hurts. We don't get contact with parents at the same time. I don't get to see my step siblings because they not are biological, but they are a big part of my family.

They say they're trying to help us and do what you want, for me, we're all siblings but technically we're all half siblings because some of us don't have the same dad, so in the whole situation when it first started my sister put for me to be put with them but I feel like they based it on our birth dads because her and another got put together because they have the same dad, and then two others got put together because they have the same dad, my eldest sister got put with her dad, because her dad's in the country.

We need more carers that take on sibling groups as all my siblings have been split apart and we only see each other once a month. I have 5 of them.

Relationships with parents and extended family members are also important, many young people felt that family time could be improved, both in frequency and in terms of the environment that the time is spent. Where young people were most unhappy is when they are unable to have meaningful contact. It has to be recognised that not all children and young people wanted family time with their parents or primary care giver due to their previous experiences.

“ | I used to have contact with my aunt face to face with a supervisor in the room. It was in a place for contact for kids in care. It can feel quite uncomfortable. Maybe change that if the process goes well, they could have one supervised and then one unsupervised to make it feel normal for the child.

I have contact with my birth family. We video call with my family in Africa. It's not monitored. The social workers should do a schedule for some kids so they don't miss contact.

Better relationships with birth families and more natural contact. Flexible time. Fun activities to make good memories.



“ **The case for change needs to put more emphasis on supporting young people to have relationships with their family, this is particularly important when the young people leave the system. Care should be short term fix, ensuring there is enough support for the family for young people to return home and to ensure a life-long relationship.**

Stability

Having a stable place to live is one of the key elements of the review. For young people it can be the basis of feeling like you belong, when your living arrangements are stable relationships can form and a support network built. There are a number of elements to stability, one is the place that you're living, another is the area you live in and finally it's knowing what is going to happen and when.

“ **It is scary going to new places and being moved away. It's a new schools and new faces so kids often run away to something familiar.**

It's tough because you aren't with your real family. Scary because you don't know where you will be put or how long you will be put there for.

You don't understand about short placements as a young person it's really confusing.

I was told that I had to move from one borough to another, and I had a week to move-out and I was mid-college. I refused to move there because of previous traumatic experiences and ended up being homeless. Although I found my own accommodation, they refused to help me – they refused to give me the leaving care grant, no housing benefits, nothing. If moving to that other borough really was the only option they should have provided me with mental health support but they refused that as well.

All I wanted was to be told what was going on. They would move me placements and not tell me where or how long for. They once moved me to Manchester and told me I would be there for 6 months but it was two years so I smashed up the house and then I was moved again. They moved me to Scotland and I really liked it there, I had a girlfriend, friends and spent time on a farm, ... but then they moved me again. I would like to go back there one day, I liked it there. I have also been moved to Wales.

Often your belongings are just put in bin-bags, and then because it was all arranged last minute you don't have keys to your new place and there is no one there so they just unload your bin bags in front of the house, and this can be very embarrassing. And it makes you feel unloved – you're on your own, you've lost your family, the people who've been with for years, your foster siblings and you're just thrown outside and having to find your own way.

What is clear from the conversations with children and young people is that the review's focus on stability, love and safety is the correct lens to be looking at. Where these elements are present, children and young people are able to feel loved and thrive, where it's not there are challenges and adversity.

What have we learned more about?

In speaking with a wide range of children and young people with lived experience there are specific issues particular groups of young people face.

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children highlighted the challenges of adapting to a new country and to a complex system intended to keep them safe. The groups revealed that navigating the leaving care system whilst also navigating the Home Office immigration system is highly stressful and there are few people who can support them with this. It often requires legal advice and specialist knowledge which few social workers, foster carers or personal advisers hold.

“ **Foster family can help you get to appointments, but my foster carer didn't know anything about the asylum process. So I would ask questions and she would always say she needed to ask.**

In own experience, social worker and solicitor didn't know each other, no link between them. [I] had delays of 2 years, SW never had contact details for lawyers.

No support after 21 if asylum claim is still unresolved.

Newly arrived young people should be placed with appropriate families for extra support.

Foster families should also be trained on how to care for young people from different cultures.

The racial disparities in the system are highlighted when speaking to children with lived experience:

“ **We want social workers to be active members of the community, and they should be reflecting the culture, class, and race of the communities they are working with. “There is a lot of white middle class social workers who don't represent the community they support.”**

Some people say when it comes to Race and Ethnicity it's really important to have a match with foster carers. If they are different ethnicities, as long as the foster carers understands and implement things into daily life then foster carers can be different races/religion as long as they respect each other.

It would help young people in care to have information shared with them about their heritage, background, family and where they've come from.

There was little understanding and awareness of different communities' ethnic minorities cultures and family dynamics which had negative impacts on me.

No one listened to me my voice was not heard – I did not feel valued.

The experience of children within secure settings is one that is not often heard. The review team was able to speak to some young people in secure children's homes. The children were here for either justice or welfare reasons. **The children and young people we spoke to told us:**

- **They were safe.**
- **They were unhappy being brought to the secure children's home in handcuffs (they were not convicted of a crime).**

- Those who knew they would be going to the secure children's home received very limited information about the home, the staff or the opportunities on offer before they arrived.
- They did not know when they would leave, in the case of being there because of being exploited, they would be reviewed every three months but lose hope of leaving.

“ | **You can be good, but you go when people want you to go.**

- They were uncertain about what would happen when they left the secure home, some would go back into the same context where they were previously in danger, others into independent living going from an extreme of secure housing to limited support. A few faced the prospect of suspended charges and a custodial sentence.

The experience of those in youth offending institutions or in contact with the police was illustrated through conversations with children in care and care leavers. Stories from this group of children and young adults highlight complex family backgrounds, frequent moves within the care system, living in independent or semi-independent housing from 16 years of age, having few strong relationships, and negative experiences with professionals. Young people often felt it was hard to be heard:

“ **The police treat you like a lost kid and a bastard. When you run away, they heavy hand you and take you back then say stay here you little shit.**

The high number of care leavers in prison or homeless is because of the limited support between 18-21, and this means they are more at risk.

There is no one behind you once you hit 18 with crime even if it was done whilst in care. Also, there is no support reporting a crime done before you come into care (I was abused as a child and recently thought it was about time I reported it and have had no support – not even from a PA).

When we ring a social worker or PA, we have to pay for the call and we only get 10 minutes. By the time they answer we then get put on hold and the call times out so we never get anywhere.

We leave prison to hostels and they are full of addicts and sex offenders. What chances do we have there?

Reflections from staff supporting care experienced people in prison illustrated that the young people often get into trouble when they are in prison because they are bored. Children who grew up in the care system are less likely to have the money for recreation and generally have lower educational attainment as a result of disrupted education, so have nothing to do whilst left in their cells. Currently, in one prison we visited, young people only have 1 hour outside of their cell for recreation, dinner and a phone call unless they have work or education. At the height of covid they were allowed out for just 30 mins a day. Being in this environment compounds the issues that care experienced people face.

Care experienced children and young people in the justice system navigate all the other challenges highlighted throughout this paper before being in prison and go on to have to cope with the challenges of being a care experienced person with a criminal record.

Friendships are an important aspect of childhood, though often the focus is on relationships with the family or extended family. Children and young people have highlighted that friends are vital, frequent home moves can result in children living away from their community, moving schools, and losing close friends.

“ **It really depends on how children make friendships. If they were given a stable placement they would feel they can make friends.**

When young people have established friendships, they often face many barriers to normal childhood activities e.g. sleepovers and residential. Young people told us how hard it is to make friends when you move regularly and how this further isolates them.

“ **Because I had friends before I went into care, I thought I'd go and see them but I was put 26 miles away from them I had to travel. My mates couldn't afford to travel.**

We have to get permission to have a sleepover off the social worker and once they took ages to respond then they forgot so I never got to go. Why can't we ask our foster parents and if they say yeah or no we get to go or not like normal people would.

Young people in care - you have to have extra permission just to go on a residential. You've got to ring social care up then they say we need to see the risk assessment. Like staying with a mate, risk assessment and DBS check.

Some people don't want a DBS check because they don't want people to dig into their background. You're setting people up to not have a group of friends.

Throughout the consultations the theme of complaints or being listened to was raised by children and young people. They often felt unable to raise a complaint about an adult in their life whether this was a professional or a carer. They highlighted complaints are often dealt with through the same system that are designed for adults, and that the investigations take too long and are not independent enough.

“ **You cannot take a foster carer to HR because it is their own home, so ultimately children and young people have little power. When complaints are made about homophobia, the responsibility is put on to young people.**

If there's something wrong with your placement and you can't speak to your social worker then you just keep it bottled up.

Abuse in the system is not really spoken about, this is often ignored quite a lot and it's causing so much harm. When we do raise it, it is often dismissed by local authorities. The focus shouldn't be on the best interests of the local authority but the interests of the child.

I was told I couldn't have a new PA and [if I didn't want the one I had] I would have leave my supported living because my case would close.

Hard to get in touch with PA's, hard to raise complaints. Might ask for written complaint, but if you can't write you can't complain.

All the complaint processes are online but we can't access them in prison with no internet.

Our lives and circumstances change so often so complaints process timescales and complexities make it not fit for purpose.

This illustrates the need to ensure that procedures that aim to address complaints are child-friendly and able to operate independently of the institutions that they are about. Children and young people told us about the importance of advocates and independent visitor services. Where children, young people and care leavers were told about these statutory rights and had access to adults in these roles they were able to build a relationship and felt more heard. Some told us that they were never told they could access these services.

“ **One of the reasons they are important is because it gives you someone in your life who you could trust. You build it up and means you can talk to them about important things. I have had mine for a couple of months.**

Should have opt out advocates so you know they exist and can opt out and can opt back in whenever. Need a litigation friend as a child, CAFCASS should be litigation friends.

We need independent advisors to make sure that young people are aware of and supported to know their rights and entitlements. This can be only done by those who are not employed by the council – there is a conflict of interest.

I think the Independent visitor scheme is a really good scheme but I don't think many people are aware of it.

Children and young people also reflected the need for their voice and opinion to be listened to and action taken in their reviews and in the decisions about their lives. This is not a new insight and is one that has been highlighted over the many years of working with care experienced people.

“ **Just ask and then listen to me. I said at the beginning I don't want to go into a foster care placement and as they didn't have any residential home placements I went into an emergency placement. I was there for 3 months. They said we do have a space but we think you're settled and doing ok where you are.**

As a teenager I wanted more insight about what is going on, you don't actually get told and you should know more. You don't get told what is actually going to happen and what has happened, unless you find out yourself.

We're moving as well, and sometimes I just think she's [social worker] bare stressed like if we don't want to move there, we don't want to move there. We didn't want to move to [town] and then she kept on asking are you sure, are you sure? We said no seven times but you're still asking.

Communication between most staff and young people, as it seems always to be one sided, as they do not listen and don't explain things properly. So, you never know what is really happening. They keep on moving people around without telling them why, or because of behaviour, but without finding out what is causing the behaviour.

Finally, young people aren't dealing with a single system or issue but multiple systems and they all interact differently:

“ **Semi independence was by far the worst years of my life. I was moved around 15 times in less than two years. This was after social services took my baby when I was still 16. I was given 0 mental health support and I was a broken person. The response was to keep moving me around the country. I don't know how I survived.**

The systems are not always designed for young people, sometimes it is hard for children to navigate, to work out what they're entitled to and how to achieve that. This is especially true when care experienced people are isolated and have little or no adult support.

The way the system plays out directly impacts on childhood, from placement stability, permissions and procedures to allow sleepovers or shaving their legs, to turning 18 and needing to secure appropriate housing, this was highlighted as the 'care cliff edge'. The disparity in entitlements is also felt when children are living out of area, in national institutions like youth custody, secure homes, and secure training centres. It is also highlighted through national forums such as Coram A National Voice, independent visitor associations, and national meetings such as those facilitated by the review. This is often called the 'postcode lottery'.

“ How can you have a normal childhood? There are too many procedures.

If I'm making an effort to help myself, it is very frustrating to keep hitting brick walls.

Family Help

Some children and young people also reflected on family help before coming into care - this relates to articles 8 and 9 of the UNCRC (1991) which states that children have a right to live with their family where it is safe to do so. Very often children wanted to stay with their family and highlight that when families are supported this is more likely to happen. This area of children's social care is explored in more detail with the Spotlight on Families work and engagement with parents.

“ There is such a negative view on social service from the family, we need to change this so families feel they can access support. We need to flip the script.

There's loads of help out there – it's just there's loads of hoops to go through, criteria to meet so it's hard to get it and that's if it's the right support for what they need.

If we have the money to pay for foster care or residential care, why cannot this money be redirected and spent on families to prevent young people from coming into care.

Parents groups would be helpful. These sessions would be on-going and provide appropriate support to parents and will “give them the opportunity to learn from more experience parents, about how they can parent effectively.” This is not about judging but providing a bit of wrap around support to parents if they need it.

They talk to mummy and look after her too.

Work with child with the family if possible. Have a better understanding of culture and community match children with carers from a similar culture.

Young carers highlight the need for family help, to relieve the caring responsibilities of children and to support the family to stay together without reaching crisis which would in turn lead to more intervention by children's social care. Ultimately the system that supports families should relieve inappropriate levels of caring responsibilities from children and young people so that they are able to attend school, have good well-being and connections with friends and family.



Figure 2: Different significant points that children and young people have highlighted



Initial contact with Children's Social care

Make this easier with fewer thresholds so families don't feel judged and assessed. Children and young people tell us they want to be believed and feel they can trust adults they speak to.

Entering care

A difficult time with a variety of experiences e.g. Being young and not understanding, being told you're not returning home after being at a Police station or at school, or entering care as an unaccompanied asylum seeking child.

Being in care

This experience varies and can be positive when children keep important relationships, have a stable place to live and get help to work through any trauma. Young people also tell us that when they know more about their story they can cope better.

Or the experience can be negative when there is instability, in professionals, places to live, or education. Children and young people also tended to blame themselves for their situation when they didn't understand why they were there.

Leaving care to return to family

Where this has happened we have primarily been told about the challenging nature of being reunited e.g. the lack of preparation and support to re-establish a relationship. It should be noted that this is mostly from the parent's perspective.

Leaving care settings into adulthood

A variety of experiences ranging from successful entry to higher education or work places, staying put with a foster carer, having support into living with their own tenancy. Often this included a significant adult being supportive and guiding/mentoring the young person to where they wanted to be.

We have also been told about the challenges young people face post 16 - living in independent or semi-independent accommodation with little support from PAs, poor support to get housing at 18 and some care leavers experiencing homelessness. When children live out of area they are often expected to get housing in their home local authority which can disrupt any significant relationships they have established. Some young people told us they also felt unsupported with few people to rely on. They have characterised this as the 'cliff edge of care'.

There are additional challenges for some young people including getting appropriate housing for disabled people, the uncertainty that comes with insecure immigration, leaving the secure estate and being unsure of care leaver entitlements, and access to records.

The system does work for some young people, but it does not work for all young people.

Care Experienced Parents

Care experienced young people told us that on top of their own care experience, when they became parents they were treated poorly or overly assessed. Sometimes they became parents at a young age, other times it was long after they had left the care system.

“ ***If you're a care leaver and you go onto have a child of your own you shouldn't be judged about your past and that you were in care.***

No one celebrated us becoming parents.

I hadn't spoken to my social worker for a long-time, and I didn't know that I had to tell my social worker I was pregnant. My case file was nearly closed until my PA found out that I was pregnant – and this was really stressful.

I got put into a mother and baby unit and I didn't get any support at all. The level of support that parents get needs to be the same everywhere, when I was in [in one city], I had more support than I did when I was in [a different area].

The message from care experienced parents was that they had less support than others they knew, often they were only able to rely on their partner's family if they were around. The 'corporate parent' did not provide the support as a grandparent would without resorting to the assessment and risk response it is designed for. They identified what would help:

“ ***Less stigma from professionals.***

To be given the chance to be a parent, especially as we haven't done it before.

What next?

From the voice and experience of children, young people and care experienced young adults it indicates the following areas which matter to children and young people:

- The homes children are placed in need to match their needs as soon as possible. This means addressing multiple moves and breakdowns, keeping children near to family or important relationships and ensuring that children can stay where they feel like they belong when they leave care.
- Keeping important relationships is vital, the processes and ways in which relationships with family including parents, siblings and extended family is kept can be improved. When ties are severed, age-appropriate understanding of why this happened is needed.
- Young people want better support with their emotional and mental health. They want help to deal with the trauma they have experienced and believe this should be available into adulthood.
- Education is the environment in which children spend a lot of their time and this is where the stigma of being in care can be most keenly felt. More can be done to avoid taking children out of lessons for meetings, or talking to children about private matters or their carers in corridors. Going on to Further and Higher Education is important and young people want better support to do this.

- Stability is key, both in places that children live and education. Exclusions and managed moves are practices that impact on the lives of children in care and can lead to poor education outcomes and further risk of harms outside the home.
- Keeping friendships is important to children and young people, the system behaviour currently further stigmatises and restricts young people by requiring friends and family to have DBS or background checks before allowing sleepovers.
- The complaints process is designed for adults and not for children, it's not independent enough which means bad practice cannot be tackled.
- Support for children leaving care needs to improve, they face a higher risk of housing and employment problems.
- The system should be able to support and care for children and young people no matter what their background, disability, sexuality, beliefs without the need to take extra measures.

Finally, children and young people shared their visions for what children's social care should be in the future. In the future social care should be:



Put the young people before the funding.

The transition out of care needs to be better.

About putting the child first.

Understanding the child's background.

Easier on the child and the social worker.

... more focused on helping people in care not moving them.

... know the person not their reports. I want them to talk to me and know my side not just the tick boxes.

Care should be a happy place, for growth, development and child/young person focused. It should feel like a second home, it should be a place where those in care are able to express their feelings from positive to negative without feeling/being judged.

It is really important that we continue to listen to children and young people, the review team are continuing to read all the feedback and ideas for recommendations. They will be creating the recommendations to address these based on all the information and activities they have received. If you would like to contact us you can by emailing or following us on Twitter.

review.childre socialcare@education.gov.uk

 [@reviewCSC](https://twitter.com/reviewCSC)

About this summary

Following the publication of [the case for change in June](#), the engagement with care experienced children and young people shifted to an organisational level. This meant that we met with children and young people through organisations where they were comfortable and with people they trusted, rather than creating national public sessions as we had done in April. Whilst the sessions in April suited some young people, many felt less able to share their thoughts in such a space. The sessions ranged from individual conversations, through to group sessions with up to 25 people involved. Alongside these engagement sessions Coram, A National Voice Ambassadors (care experienced young people) designed and coordinated consultation feedback from children in care councils and care leaver forums, and care experienced people over the age of 16, were brought together in a series of open sessions called Bridge the Gap.

About the children and young people who engaged with the review:

Since the start of June we have heard from children and young people who have self-identified as having a disability, being an unaccompanied asylum seeker, being Black or minority ethnic, being in prison, being a care experienced parent, having experience of homelessness, mental health problems, drug and alcohol addiction, disrupted education, being LGBTQ+ and those who have been exploited. The children and young people had experiences of various home settings including residential care homes, foster care, kinship care, semi-independent and independent living, secure children's homes, unregulated accommodation, and prison.

This engagement summary sets out what children and young people have told us, how the systems plays out through their eyes and experiences. Young people do have ideas to improve the system, often these are relatively immediate tangible changes and it is these that we must hold in the forefront of our minds to make the larger systemic changes.

What did we ask?

There were a range of pathways for care experienced people to engage in the review, some organisations and individuals proactively communicated their interest to participate, invited review team members or the review chair, Josh MacAlister, to attend meetings.

Other people responded to the Engagement Update published on the review website or completed the Expression of Interest forms held on the website and advertised on social media. Finally, the review team sent out information about children and young people's engagement in the review through professional networks e.g. Virtual Schools network, the youth custody service, the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS), and participation workers networks.

When the review team met with professionals across children's social care, they enquired about speaking to children and young people through existing groups. Approximately 200 children and young people have engaged in these methods. In addition to this 145 care experienced people participated across the different Bridge the Gap sessions, and 31 local authority children in care or care leaver groups submitted engagement feedback to Coram Voice. The review also received 7 sets of feedback from a variety of people or groups where we didn't engage them directly.

The methods of engagement varied to suit the needs of the children and young people. These included individual conversations, group discussions, written activities, using digital tools, responding to questions, bringing questions to the review team, creating pictures or collages, virtual or in-person when covid-19 restrictions allowed. Some in-person sessions were postponed due to Covid, others were relocated to online spaces.

Limitations

The communications did not reach everyone in the care experienced community so, although we have been as comprehensive and inclusive as possible, the review is aware that there might be gaps and individual experiences which are not reflected in this document. In addition, many organised groups of young people had commitments so were unable to prioritise the review engagements at that time. People were encouraged to answer the questions and submit responses in their own time where possible.

Online spaces only work for people with access to the internet and devices that support it. Throughout our engagement we were aware of the limitations and exclusions that young people face e.g. children in secure settings could not participate in online engagement sessions and so we had to wait until later in the review when it was safe to visit in person, which we have now done.

The resource of the team is limited so we created an Indirect Engagement guide that group leaders could facilitate and then share with the review team. This was intended to reach as many people as possible and could be flexible for people to adapt to meet their group needs.

The review team is aware that the period of engagement fell over the national lockdowns, the exam period, and summer holidays, all of which require young people's attention in different ways. All the young people invited to engage did so voluntarily.

This is a summary of the listening we have been doing between June and October 2021. This work will continue as the review team develop ideas and solutions in the next phase of our work.

About the quotes in this summary:

The young people who engaged with the review agreed to having their anonymous unidentifiable quotes used in the review documents. These quotes are from children with care experience. Although the review has the responses sent into Coram ANV, they are not replicated in this summary of children and young people's engagement. Please refer to their report to see what the Ambassadors summarised as the key elements of children and young people's experience of care.