

Children's messages to the Minister



A report of children's contributions to the 2009 ministerial stocktake of care, by the Children's Rights Director for England



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Introduction



In November 2009, Baroness Delyth Morgan of Drefelyn, Minister for Children, Young People and Families, is checking up for the Government on how well services are doing for children in care and care leavers. As Children's Rights Director for England, I have asked children and young people in care, and care leavers, for their views and messages to feed in to this 'stocktake' by the Minister. This is my report of what the children and young people have said. It is being given to everyone who is coming to the Government's conference about care in November 2009, and Baroness Morgan has promised to ensure that the children and young people's views in this report will be taken into account as future government policy is developed.

I am also sending this report personally to Opposition spokespeople in Parliament, to all children's services councils in England, and to the people in Ofsted who inspect children's services. I believe it is important for all of these people, too, to see what children have told us about how care is doing.

As well as this report, I and my team carry out an independent survey each year of how children think particular key things are going for children who are being looked after in care or in residential education. I am also sending that children's assessment of how care is doing to the Government for them to take into account in their stocktake of care. This year's survey report gives the views of 1,195 children and young people, and is being published as the *Children's care monitor 2009*. The survey gives children's views about six things children have told us are very important to their lives: keeping safe, bullying, having a say in what happens to them, making complaints and suggestions, education, and care planning for people being looked after in care. It also looks at changes since last year's *Children's care monitor* report.¹

The law sets out my duties as Children's Rights Director. One of my main duties is to ask children and young people for their views about how children and young people are looked after in England. I report what children and young people have told me and my team, and so in this report I have not left out any views that we might disagree with, or that the Government might either disagree with or dislike. We have not made our own comments on anything children or young people told us. We have not added our own views or ideas. What this report sets out is purely the views of children and young people.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read 'Roger Mays'.

¹ You can find copies of all my reports on our website www.rights4me.org.



How we asked for views

We asked children and young people for their views in three ways. Firstly, we held two focus discussion groups with children and young people about their experiences of care. We asked each Director of Children's Services to suggest two young people to join our discussions, but said that we would only consider those who were not already on either a Children in Care Council or any other consultation or participation group. We wanted to talk with children and young people who were not already in local groups that regularly discussed care. We accepted the first 30 children whose nominations reached us (although eventually 31 children attended the discussions). We held the children's focus groups in the Palace of Westminster: one in a Committee Room of the House of Lords, and one in a Committee Room of the House of Commons. The Minister, Baroness Delyth Morgan, listened to our discussions and put some questions of her own to the children. A small number of senior officials from the Department of Children, Schools and Families listened to the discussions. As Children's Rights Director, I chaired the two groups, and a member of my children's rights team took notes of what the children said. In this report, we have recorded all the points the children made.

Secondly, we invited two members of each Children in Care Council (or similar group) in England to attend a conference with us at the Science Museum in London. (Children in Care Councils are advisory groups of young people in care being set up by each council.) At this conference, we presented a set of questions about care on the giant cinema screen at the museum. Children and young people gave their answers using electronic key pads, and a computer counted their responses. The Minister and her senior officials from the Department for Children, Schools and Families observed the voting and saw the results as they came up on the screen. We ended the conference with a question and answer session to the Minister. This report contains the complete set of votes that the children and young people gave at the conference, including their votes on various government ideas for improving care. We have also set out the issues that children and young people raised with the Minister in the question and answer session.

Finally in this report, we invited all children and young people who were members of their council's Children in Care Council (or similar group) to fill in a survey card questionnaire for us about the work of their Children in Care Council. We have set out the results in this report.

A total of 31 children and young people, nominated by 16 different local authorities, took part in our discussion groups at the Palace of Westminster. Seventeen took part in one group, 14 in the other. Another 121 children and young people, from 69 local authorities, took part in our conference at the Science Museum. Not every person answered every question, of course. The smallest number answering any particular question was 105. Finally, 285 children and young people, from 80 different local authorities, answered our survey for people on Children in Care Councils. Again, not everyone answered every question, and the smallest number of people answering any particular question in the survey was 242. Altogether, 437 children and young people gave us their views for this report.

The Palace of Westminster discussion groups

At the beginning of each group, we asked the children and young people to tell us what they thought were the good, and then the bad, things about being in care. This is what they told us.

Good things about being in care were doing lots of activities and having trips and days out, getting more opportunities than other children, and getting better life experiences by meeting more people and especially other children from different places. Being in care could mean getting help at school, and having more freedom, more independence and more pocket money than before. It could also be like a 'home from home', like having an extended family, where you get looked after, grow up more as a person, and where you don't have to worry about things you had to worry about at home.

Bad things about being in care were being away from home and missing your family, moving from one placement to another, living with strangers, not getting on with your carers, not getting on with other children or young people in the same placement, getting bullied by other children or young people just for being in care, and not being able to do things you want to do. One example was not being allowed to stay overnight at friends' houses because their parents hadn't been police checked. Twelve out of 17 in one group said they had experienced this (there is more about this later in this report). An example of moving placement being a bad thing was when you were getting on well in a placement, but had to move on because your carers were only supposed to be short-term ones.

Other bad things put forward included living in children's homes that were badly managed or where the age range was wrong for you, and sometimes having social workers who don't listen, don't often see you, and don't do what they are meant to do at the time they are meant to do it. In one group, some young people said there was nothing bad about being in care as far as they were concerned.

We asked about **being separated from brothers or sisters** when the children and young people first came into care. In one group, 11 out of 17 said that being in care had separated them from their siblings. They said this felt bad. Some were no longer in touch, and they had wanted to stay together but had not been asked about the decision to separate them. The group agreed that in their experience, as time passes, brothers and sisters in care tend to lose

touch. As one young person put it, 'contact gets less over time'. One young person said it had wrecked their life not seeing their sister. Another said that as time passed, it was not just your brothers and sisters you missed seeing, but eventually it was their children as well: 'I'm missing out.'

Those who had stayed in touch with brothers or sisters had arranged this themselves, or had used Facebook (which they found easy) or the telephone to keep in touch. One kept in touch by sometimes staying with her sister at her foster home. Some said their staff or social worker helped them to keep in touch with brothers or sisters. For large groups of siblings, a lot of help might be needed to keep them all in touch with one another: 'When you've lots of brothers and sisters it's hard to see them all. We need help to get us all together – they just don't do enough to help.' One young person told us how he had lost all contact with his siblings when he came into care, but his carers had helped and supported him over this and he is now starting to re-establish contact.

We discussed **social workers**. In one group, 14 of the 17 young people said that it was hard to get in touch with their social worker when they needed to. This was because they were usually out when you rang them, and didn't usually phone back. Some had their social worker's mobile phone number, which helped. They said you often had to wait ages to see a social worker when you wanted to see one, and sometimes they didn't turn up when arranged, so that by the time you saw them, the problem had gone out of your head. Children and young people in the group also said social workers could turn up quickly when they wanted to see a child, but if the child asked to see their social worker this could be difficult to arrange. One group thought that social workers were generally too busy, with too many children to work with. In the other, someone wondered what social workers were out doing if everyone in the group was saying they found it hard to see them. There was a general agreement that children and young people only see their social worker about once every three to four months, and this isn't often enough.

Some children told the Minister how what social workers do and don't do can make a big difference to children's lives. One child said they had wanted to go to a camp, but because their social worker didn't fill the form in, they missed out on the camp. Another young person had been

picked to play in a top football team, but had to pull out of playing in the match because their social worker said they needed to see them. The social worker didn't turn up.

One group said that social workers needed to give children more time when they visited, and to be quicker at getting things a young person needs, such as a laptop or a National Insurance number. The group thought that there needed to be more social workers to do these things, and suggested that a child could have two social workers, who could then cover for each other.

The children thought it was important that when their social worker visited them, they were able to **talk to their social worker alone**, without a carer or anyone else present or listening in. We asked one group what usually happens now when their social worker visits them. Six out of 14 said their social worker does see them on their own, but eight said there was usually a carer or other person there while they were talking to their social worker.



Children in our groups said **they had not had any choice of who was to be their social worker**. It was not possible to say if you would prefer a male or a female social worker. One person said they had made a complaint about their social worker, but that hadn't led to the change of social worker they had hoped for.

This discussion led to the question to one group of **what makes a good social worker**. The list was as follows.

- They're there when you need them.
- They care about their job.
- They're honest with you and don't write reports that aren't accurate, so that you trust them.
- They don't give excuses for not doing things for you.
- They always come to see you on time.
- They are able to build up a good relationship 24-7.
- They want to stay in the job – there's too many changes.
- They always listen to you.
- They speak properly to us, with respect – not too adult and not trying street talk which just sounds stupid.
- They work full time and visit the children weekly.
- They don't keep information back from you.
- They know what they are doing – and have life experience as well as knowing things by the book.
- If they say they will check something out for you, they will always come back to you with an answer.

The Minister asked one group whether anyone wanted to become a social worker themselves. The response was summed up by one person in the group, who said, 'It's not an easy job – they're the most hated people in the world.'

We asked for more views about **what is good and what is bad about changing placements in care?** On the good side, children reported that a new placement can mean you get a fresh start. On the bad side, they told us that not only did they not like having to keep moving when they didn't

want to, but they were often not told when they were going to be moved, or why they had to move, and didn't have much say in the move. One person said 'You should be given some choice – not just one placement and that's it.' In one of our groups, 13 children told us they had had no say in choosing their last placement, and one child told us they'd had a say. The final comment on this in one group was: 'You should have some choice – it's your life.'

One person told how they had reacted badly when they were moved in a rush. Another said that they were told they were going to be moved straight away, but this had not happened five months later and nobody had told them what was going on. One group agreed that, generally, children in care are just not told enough about what is happening in their lives.

Two children described how they felt about their own placement changes. One said, 'Horrible – you just start to

open up to one carer and then you're moved on to another.' They said that when they first came into care, they had been moved every couple of weeks. They had got so stressed that they had started running away. The other told us they had been moved to a placement, and the very next day their social worker had left their job: 'There was no one who knew anything about me – that was terrible.'

Another young person told us about how they were first taken into care. 'I was taken into care by someone I had never met before. They just turned up in my bedroom and told me I was going into care. I didn't know anyone. They could have tried placing me with family members first or had them there when I was told.'

Some children felt that sometimes being moved around in care could be as bad for you as the problems that had brought you into care in the first place: 'You don't understand what's happening when you're a child – it puts



more troubles on you than being with the person they are taking you away from.’

We also heard about **good practice in changing placements**. One person said that they were used to moving, but on the last move they had made they had a chance to meet their new carer beforehand and to have a trial stay at their house, so the child had a chance to get to know them and decide if they liked them. Both our discussion groups said that changing placements would always be better if the child was told where they would be going and given the chance to meet their new carers before they moved. Having photographs of new carers first would be helpful. Children advised that they should be given a chance to say whether they want to move and, if so, to do the move slowly and gradually wherever possible. They said it should also be possible to move temporarily at first to see if it is right for the child. If a temporary placement works out well though, it might then be best for the child to stay there rather than have to move on again just because the placement was not supposed to be long term.

Most children agreed that when someone is taken into care, social care services should first see if they can be **placed with other family members**. One child said: ‘It should be someone you know and who knows you.’ It could even be a family friend. One young person advised: ‘If you have no trouble with other family members (not the ones who social services are worried about) then let us go to stay with family first – give us the choice.’

Later in this report, we give some figures about children’s possessions being moved from one placement to another in **black plastic rubbish bin bags**. Some children in our discussion groups had experienced this for themselves, and said that it felt humiliating, and made them feel as if their belongings were just rubbish.

Our groups discussed **moving school when they moved from one living placement to another**. Children told us that this isn’t too bad when you are at primary school, but changing when you are about to take exams is not right. At that time, you need to stick with the same course if you are to do well. Children said that what makes a change of school hard is if you have moved a long way away and so do not know anyone, either where you live or at school. Changing school can be a bad thing because you lose

contact with friends. This can be especially hard, because if you are in care you then have to ask for special permission to see your old friends or stay overnight with them, and that permission can be hard to get. Not everyone in the group thought that it is always a bad thing to move to a new school. Sometimes it can be good to move to a fresh start in a new school as well as in a new placement. It all depends on where you move to.

Another issue discussed was **how much say children in care have about their lives**, apart from placement moves. Some said staff sometimes come and ask your views. Some had been asked to fill in questionnaires about what they were happy or not happy with. Others had attended a meeting with a Children’s Rights Officer. In one group, about half the young people had heard of Children in Care Councils. They thought it was a good idea to be able to have a say in things that affect all children in care, but didn’t know how they would be able to feed their views into their local Children in Care Council. Everyone in that group thought that children in care did need to have more say in their lives. Children proposed that one way to do this might be to be able to go through your social worker to someone higher up in social care services.

One group gave us examples of how they didn’t get listened to over things that were important in their lives. One said: ‘Everyone is so concerned about looking out for my mum but I don’t want to see her – why won’t they listen to me, it’s a waste of time.’ Another said: ‘You end up having to throw a tantrum to get them to listen – “you don’t listen to me so I won’t listen to you” – it works!’ A third young person spoke about not being able to see his family even though it was the one thing he really wanted.

Children told us how much they were able to do their own choice of **hobbies**. Many said that being in care meant they were able to take up new hobbies more easily than they would have been able to before, and carers helped them with their hobbies. Some said, though, that there could be two problems with some hobbies: it can be difficult if there is much cost involved, or if social care services feel they need to do a risk assessment. Children said that a risk assessment can sometimes stop you from doing a particular hobby. One person gave the example that, after a risk assessment, it was decided that horse riding was too dangerous.



In one group, we asked children whether they had **care plans**. Six out of 14 children said they had care plans, but others said they didn't know what care plans were.

Children in the groups also gave their advice on **how children in care can be helped more at school or college to get more GCSEs**. Individual support was important, and about three quarters of the children in one group thought that having a 'designated teacher' to support children in care would be a good idea. This came with a warning though. Children thought it was important not to make children in care feel different at school. It was also very important to avoid taking children in care out to special classes when they didn't really need this, because it makes them stand out. They also said it was especially important to support children in care who are high achievers and who want to do well. This would include encouragement and help to go to university.

Having a **laptop** computer was an important help in studying. In one group, half the children said they had been given a laptop. Some had been told they would be getting one, but it had never arrived.

Each group was asked if they knew about the work of **Independent Reviewing Officers** (people who attend children's reviews and make sure that the council consults the children and keeps to its plans for them). About half the children and young people knew what they were, and some had heard of them and knew they were involved in their care reviews. One person asked if they were the same as Independent Visitors (people who visit children who are out of touch with their families). In one group I then explained what an Independent Reviewing Officer is, and asked the group to suggest what rules these officers should follow. Suggestions included that Independent Reviewing Officers should always be good at communicating with young people, that they should try and change rules that are wrong (for example, not being allowed to see your records until you are 16, as one young person had been told) and that they should make sure that your social worker is following your care plan. One young person suggested that they should try to make sure the adults looking after children have care experience themselves.

On **preparing to leave care**, some children said they had not been helped much, and one said their social worker had simply dumped them on an after care worker. Others had been trained in shopping and budgeting, or had support from a 'pathway plan worker' or an independence skills group, which had been useful.

Groups were asked **what changes they had noticed in the care system** since they had come into care. Young people thought that people are staying in care longer. They thought that care staff were now being moved around a lot. Staff changes were hard to cope with in residential care, and you didn't usually know why staff had left you. They also thought that there is much more attention these days to 'health and safety' and risk assessments, and this is limiting activities – even how younger children play with friends can be affected. Something children in these groups said hadn't changed during their time in care was that children in care went through lots of changes of social worker.

We were told about some **changes to the care system** that children and young people in our groups would like to see. One was to have a bigger clothing allowance, even if this meant having less money for some other things. Another was to see a social worker more often – and to have one who definitely listened to the young person. A third was to stop holding their children in care review meetings in their schools, because that just makes children in care stand out more from other children at school.

Other changes the young people wanted in the care system were to get young people into meetings with important decision makers: 'We need to know why decisions are made – they don't tell you.' Sometimes, children said, social workers made decisions for children when, even if they had been their social worker for ages, they didn't really know the child or what that person really thought or wanted. One person thought that there should be less judging of children and their families in the care system and by social workers, who sometimes didn't have the experience of trying to bring up young people themselves: 'Stop judging us. They judge your family – even your mam, even though they don't have kids themselves. How do they know how to bring kids up when they're not mams themselves?'

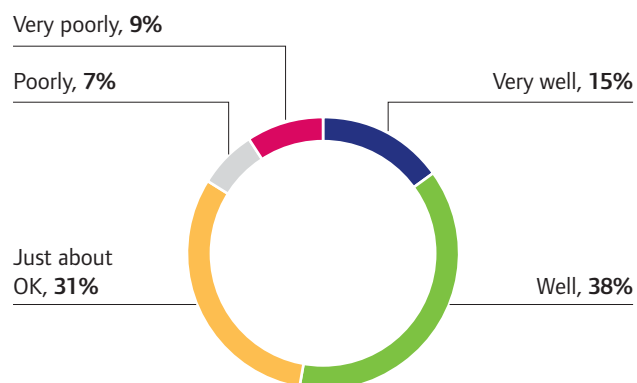
Finally, one group gave the following messages directly to the Minister, who was in the room with them.

- Keep brothers and sisters together in care.
- When siblings are separated in care, make sure there is more contact.
- Treat people in care the same as others.
- Pay carers less – it should not be for the money.
- Get better carers.
- Let children in care have more contact with brothers and sisters who have been adopted.
- Arrange some support groups for children in care (friends not in care don't want to hear everything about your life, but groups like this know just to listen and understand what things are like).
- Have more social workers and family workers.

Children in Care Councils members' conference at the Science Museum

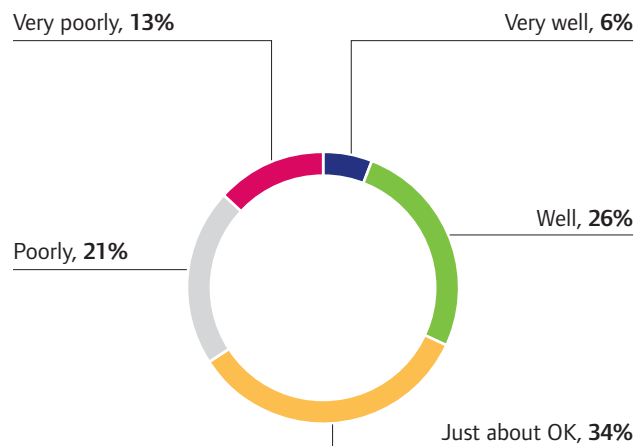
We started our conference at the Science Museum for members of Children in Care Councils with a set of questions asking children and young people to give their rating of how well councils are doing on each of the 'outcomes' the Government has said it wants for all children in care. Here are their ratings for each 'outcome'.

How well are councils doing at keeping children in care safe?



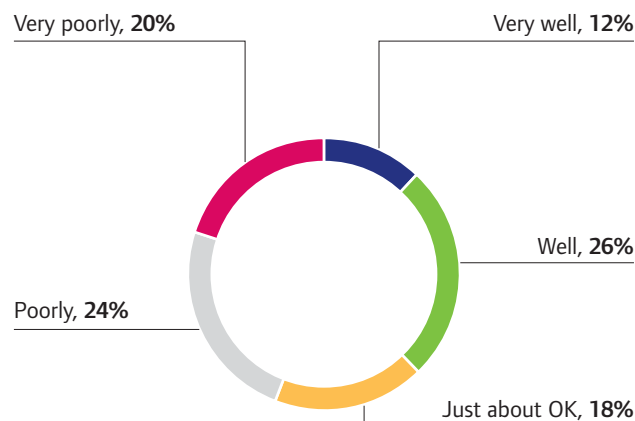
Based on votes from 117 children. Of the 121 children four did not vote.

How well are councils doing at keeping children in care healthy?



Based on votes from 117 children. Of the 121 children four did not vote.

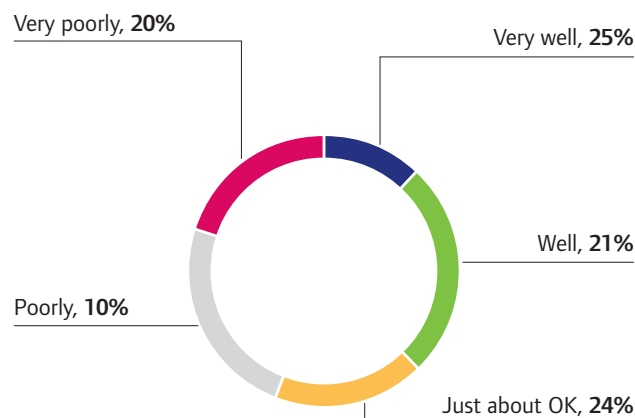
How well are councils doing at making sure children in care enjoy good activities and leisure time?



Based on votes from 121 children. All children voted on this question.

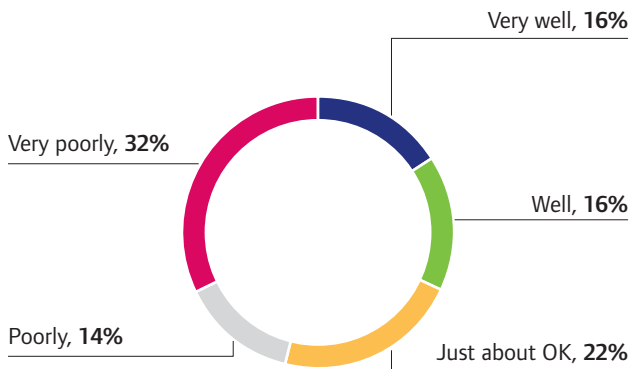
The Government outcomes link 'enjoying' and 'achieving' together in the same outcome, but because children and young people very often talk to us about activities and about learning as two very different things, we have separated these two out here.

How well are councils doing at making sure children in care achieve well in their learning?



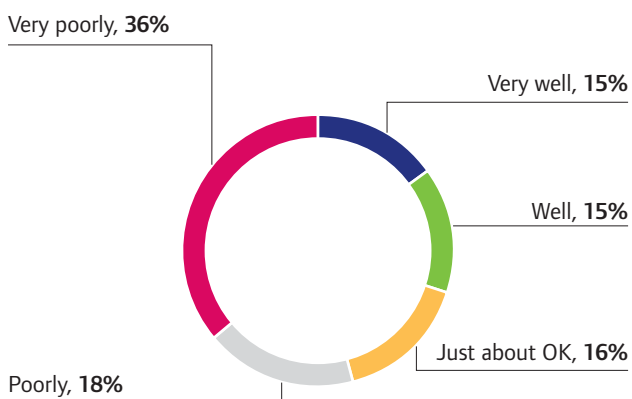
Based on votes from 117 children. Of the 121 children four did not vote.

How well are councils doing at helping children in care to make a good contribution to other people and the community?



Based on votes from 116 children. Of the 121 children five did not vote.

How well are councils doing at helping children in care prepare to get good jobs in the future?



Based on votes from 117 children. Of the 121 children four did not vote.

Looking at all the votes cast by the young people at the conference, **councils were voted best at keeping children in care safe** (with 53% rating them as doing well or very well, and 16% as doing poorly or very poorly) **and next best at making sure children in care achieve well in their learning** (with 46% rating them as doing well or very well but 30% as doing poorly or very poorly).

On everything else, young people’s ratings were more negative than positive. **Councils were voted worst at helping children get good jobs in the future** (with 30% rating them as doing well or very well, but 54% as doing poorly or very poorly), **and next worst at helping children in care make a good contribution to the community** (with 32% rating them as doing well or very well at this, but 46% rating them as doing poorly or very poorly).

In summary, the young people rated how councils are doing in meeting the government outcomes in this order.

Doing best

- 1 Keeping children in care safe
- 2 Making sure children in care achieve well in their learning

Doing worst

- 3 Keeping children in care healthy
- 4 Making sure children in care enjoy good activities and leisure time
- 5 Helping children in care make a good contribution to the community
- 6 Helping children in care prepare to get good jobs

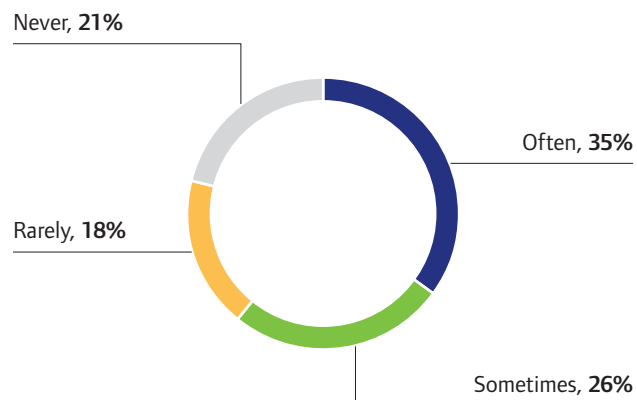
In green are the two outcomes about which more young people were positive than negative. In red are the ones on which more young people were negative than positive.

Some key issues

Next we asked the young people at our conference from Children in Care Councils for their views on a number of particular issues affecting children in care.

First we asked about children and young people in care being discriminated against just for being from care. We knew that this was an issue from one of our recent children's views reports, *Care and prejudice*.² The figure below shows how members of Children in Care Councils voted on this.

Have you ever been discriminated against by other people just because you were in care?

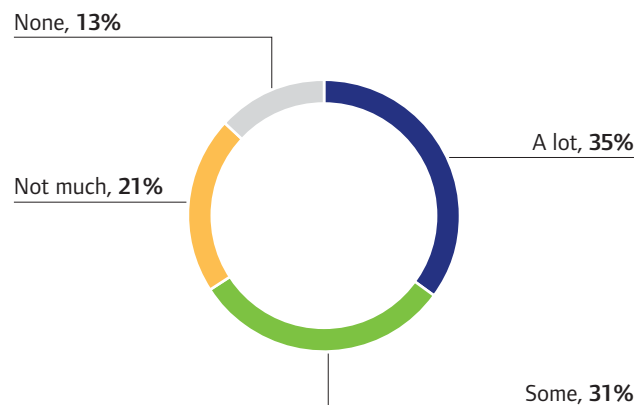


Based on responses from 116 children. Of the 121 children five did not answer this question.

From these answers, **over a third of the members of Children in Care Councils had themselves often been discriminated against just for being in care.** Sixty-one per cent had 'sometimes' or 'often' been discriminated against just for being in care. Just over one in five (21%) had never been discriminated against for being in care.

Next we asked about how much difference the opinions of the children and young people on Children in Care Councils made to what happened for children in care in their areas. The figure shows how the members of those Councils rated this.

How much difference do the Children in Care Council's opinions make to what happens for children in care in your area?



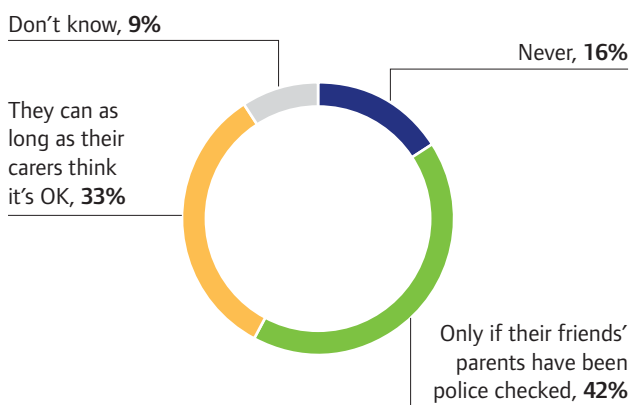
Based on responses from 108 children. Of the 121 children 13 did not answer this question.

Two thirds of the Children in Care Council members at our conference said that the opinions of their Children in Care Council make 'some' or 'a lot of' difference to what happens for children in care in their areas. Just over one in eight (13%) said that they make no difference.



The next issue was one that children in care have raised with us during many of our consultations since we started our work over eight years ago. Children in care often tell us that they are not allowed to stay overnight with their friends, in their friends' houses, like other children can, because there is a rule in their authority that their friends' parents would have to have police checks first. This has never actually been a government policy, but it is a rule that still exists in many parts of the country. Here is what the members of Children in Care Councils told us about this.

Are children and young people in your authority allowed to stay overnight at friends' houses?

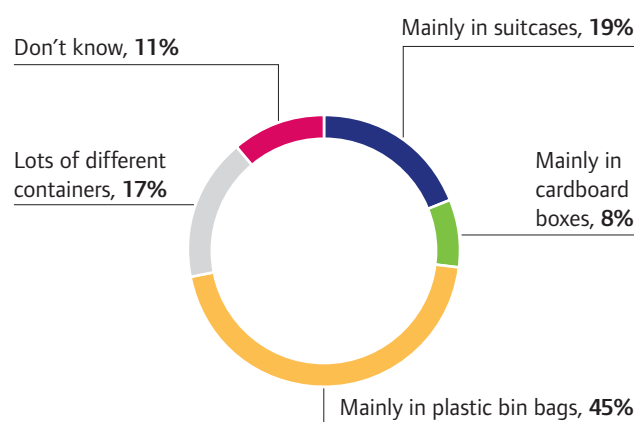


Based on responses from 107 children. Of the 121 children 14 did not answer this question.

Unusually, this is a question that has a 'right answer'. It is government policy that, unless a young person's care plan or a court order say something else, or there is a particular risk about the visit, children and young people should be allowed to stay overnight with friends at their friends' houses as long as their carers think it's OK, and police checks are not necessary. But still **42% of the Children in Care Council members voting at our conference reported that in their authorities, children and young people are only allowed to stay overnight in friends' houses if their friends' parents have been police checked.**

Our next question was about something else that many children in care have raised over the years – that when they are being moved from one placement to another, their possessions are often carried about in plastic rubbish bin bags rather than in proper carriers or suitcases. We wanted to find out from our Children in Care Council members whether this still happens. Their answers are below.

The last time someone you knew moved to a new placement in care, how were their possessions taken to the new place?

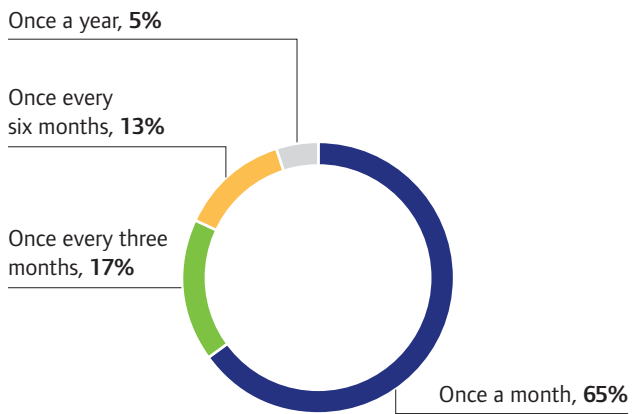


Based on responses from 106 children. Of the 121 children 15 did not answer this question.

Even though there have been national campaigns against carrying the possessions of children in care from one placement to another in plastic rubbish bags, 45% of the Children in Care Council members at our conference reported that this still happened when someone they knew last moved to a new placement.

The last issue we asked our Children in Care Council members' conference about was how often council officials, like social workers, should visit each child in care. We know that the Government is working on future rules about this. The advice we were given by the conference is set out in the next figure.

How often should a child in care get a visit from someone from the council?



Based on votes from 105 children. Of the 121 children 16 did not vote.

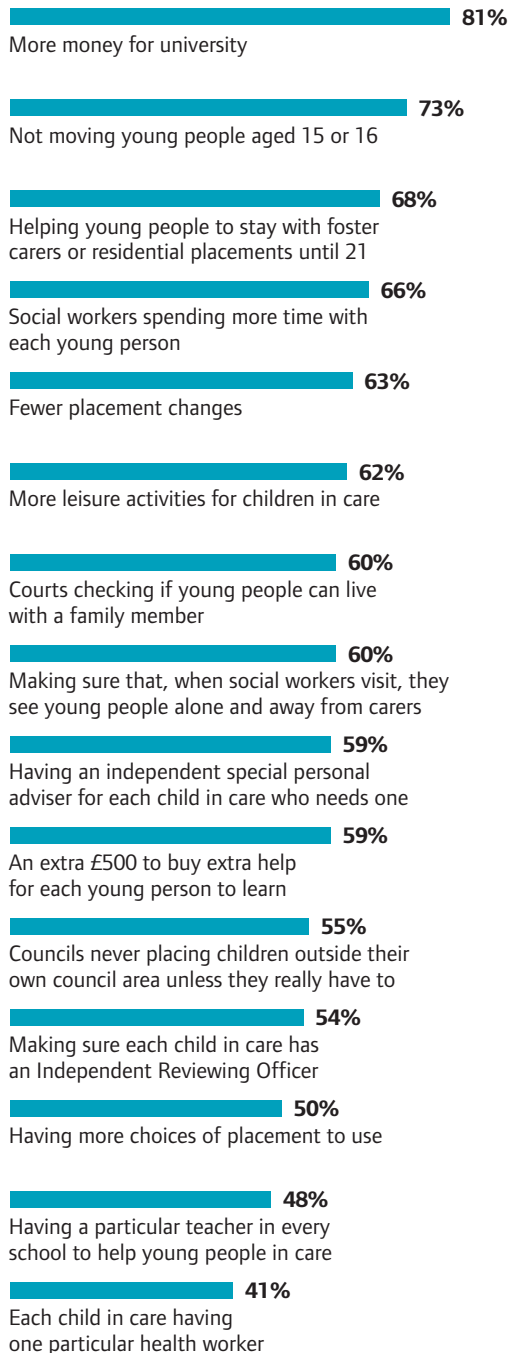
Almost two thirds of those voting at our conference, who were all members of Children in Care Councils in their authorities, recommended that children in care should get monthly visits from someone from their care authority.

In the last question at the conference, we asked members of Children in Care Councils for their views on which of the Government's ideas for improving care would make the most difference. We gave them a list of 15 Government ideas, some being tried out in projects, and some going into the law or guidance in the future. We asked young people at the conference to vote for which ones they thought would do the most for children and young people in care. People could vote for more than one idea. Here are the results.



Which of these changes the Government is working on will make the biggest positive difference for children in care?

Percentage voting for each idea



Based on 1,086 votes from 121 children.

The Government ideas that got the most votes from members of Children in Care Councils were more money to help young people in care go to university; whenever possible, not moving young people aged 15 or 16, and likely to be doing exams, to new placements; and helping young people, if everyone involved is willing, to stay in foster care or residential placements until they are 21. All these top ideas are to do with older young people and leaving care.

Only two ideas got votes from fewer than half the young people at the conference. These were having a particular ‘designated’ teacher in every school to help young people in care (this received support from just under half the people at the conference), and each child in care having one particular health worker.



Proposals to the Minister at the Science Museum conference

After the electronic voting session at the conference, we invited the children and young people from Children in Care Councils to put any proposals they wished directly to the Minister, who attended this session to hear them personally, so that they can be taken into account by the Government.

Here is the full list of the proposals made at this conference session.

- There should be help for young people to attend college courses, as well as university.
- The financial side of 'staying put' projects to let children stay with their carers over the age of 18 needs to be properly sorted out.
- Councils should use some of the extra money they are given to help children in care to buy laptops.
- Special teachers for children in care should not be put into schools, because that makes children in care stand out and suffer from discrimination by other children.
- More frequent checks need to be made on children's homes and foster carers.
- Young people's National Insurance numbers should be sent directly to young people themselves, not to councils, where they get delayed or lost.
- Care leavers should be used as advisers to children and young people in care, using their unique experience of care themselves.
- Young people in care should have driving lessons paid for.
- There should be clear guidance on how Children in Care Councils are meant to work.
- Family members who look after a child should get the same financial help that other carers do.
- £49 a week is not enough to live on after leaving care and should be reviewed.
- All local authorities should involve young people from care in training special teachers and new foster carers – including confidentiality and making sure that help for children in care does not make them stand out from others at school.
- The Government should actually use the information it gets from children and young people to improve things for children in care.
- Children in care must be told exactly who they can go to if they are unhappy with their placement or their social worker.
- Adults' opinions must not count for more than the opinions of children in care.
- Social workers should spend more time with children in care and less on paperwork.
- Finances for care leavers should be sorted out before they leave care, so that they do not have to rely on crisis loans.
- A child in care must be treated like any other child in the country, and not be given support at school or anywhere else in a way that makes others discriminate against them.

The survey of Children in Care Council members

All members of Children in Care Councils (or similar groups) in England were invited to take part in our survey. The findings in this section of the report are based on the answers given by the 285 young people who returned their survey forms to us.

We used the survey to find out more details of the work of the new Children in Care Councils in bringing the views and concerns of children in care to the people making decisions in their local care authorities.

First we asked what were the main things that Children in Care Councils had discussed so far. We didn't suggest any answers. Out of the 285 council members who responded to our survey, 279 answered this question. Here are the six subjects that we were most often told had been discussed in Children in Care Councils. Each of these was listed for us by at least one in 10 of the children and young people who answered our survey.

Subjects most discussed by Children in Care Councils	
The Pledge	29% of children
Setting up the Children in Care Council	24% of children
Support for children in care	16% of children
The 'outcomes' for children in care	14% of children
Communicating with children in care	12% of children
Education and training	11% of children

Over a quarter of the people answering the survey told us they had discussed their authority's Pledge in the new Children in Care Council. The Pledge is a document setting out the promises that each local authority makes to all the children and young people in its care, and every authority has been asked by the Government to have a local Pledge. Developing pledges was a new idea, along with setting up Children in Care Councils themselves, so it is perhaps not surprising that many of these Councils have discussed their authority's Pledge as one of their first subjects. The second

subject on the list, setting up the Children in Care Council, is also not surprising, since these Councils are something new in most areas.

The third subject on the list, support for children in care, included discussing funding for many different practical sorts of support, like having laptops or gym membership, clothing allowances and bus passes.

The 'outcomes' that were discussed in fourth place on the list were the 'outcomes' that the Government had published in its document *Every Child Matters*. These were the ones we had asked about at our Science Museum conference: keeping children safe, keeping children healthy, making sure children enjoy good activities and leisure time and achieve well in their learning, helping children to make a contribution to the community, and preparing children to get good jobs in the future.

The fifth subject, communicating with children in care, included discussions about using social websites to keep in touch.

Although not mentioned often enough to make it to the list of top subjects, it is worth saying that the next most usual discussions in Children in Care Councils were leaving care, social workers and pocket money. Six per cent had discussed sleepovers, something we had asked about at our Science Museum conference. Members of two different



Children in Care Councils told us that their councils had discussed another subject we had asked about at the conference: putting children’s possessions in plastic rubbish bags.

Examples of what Children in Care Councils have discussed

‘Changing documents so kids can understand them’

‘Children’s views on how they are being treated by social services. We have interviewed the parenting panel and showed them where they are going wrong and how things can be improved’

‘Differences in residential and foster care, sleepovers, body piercing, smoking in school’

‘Every child matters, positive change for leaving care’

‘Having more freedom, treating children in care as individuals, letting us have our say, preventing false hope’

‘Looked after children reviews, consent, contact, payment of young people, Pledge, young people’s role in corporate parenting, rules and regulations, newsletter’

‘We have talked about the launch and then we have discussed the Pledge’

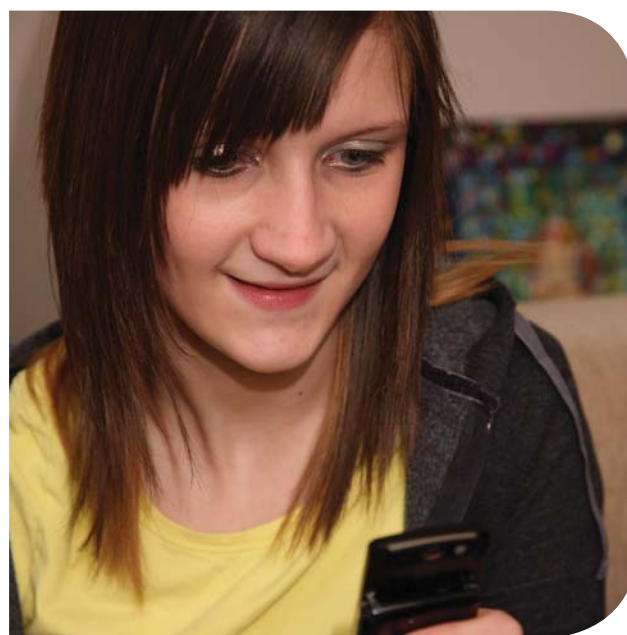
As well as asking what Children in Care Councils had already discussed since they were set up, we asked members of these councils what else they thought their Children in Care Councils should do for children and young people in care. Again, we didn’t suggest any possible answers. A total of 242 people answered this question and made 41 different suggestions (43 people made no suggestions). Here are the

three answers that each came from at least one in 10 of those who answered this survey question.

What else should your Children in Care Council do for children in care?	
Nothing	16% of children
Organise more activities	16% of children
Give more information and support	16% of children

These top three extra things were very different. Sixteen per cent of Children in Care Council members thought that there was nothing more that their Children in Care Councils should be doing than they were already doing. Exactly the same percentage thought their Children in Care Councils should have more activities for them to do. The same percentage again thought their Councils should organise more information and support for children in care.

The next two most usual answers, though from fewer than one in 10 in our survey, were that Children in Care Councils should become better at getting children’s views across, and that they should work on involving more children in care in their areas.



Examples of what else Children in Care Councils should do for children in care

'Tell people in the council what needs to change, feed back to young people'

'Change some legislations, highlight areas social services are lacking'

'Campaign to make things better for young people'

'Doing inspections of services for looked after children'

'Our very own website so the children can contact us'

'Get their views across, fight for the right of younger people, help those not involved in the care council to have their voice heard'

'Help to get rid of stigma of being in care and make young people in care feel like normal young people'

'Monitor progress of work on promises to children in care'

'Bring looked after children not on council views to executives; members from the council could go and meet groups of looked after children'

'Take issues to senior management and director of children's services; be involved in training'

Our next survey question was about how children who aren't on their authority's Children in Care Council can get their views and concerns across to the Council. Out of the 285 in the survey, 271 answered this question and provided 42 different answers. In our past consultations, one of the

worries some children had about Children in Care Councils was that they might be very good for young people who were on them, but might not help 'quiet children', who did not like meetings and were not very good at getting things across, to be heard. As usual, we asked for children and young people's answers without making any suggestions ourselves. Here is the list of the main ways we heard about in our survey for children who weren't on a Children in Care Council to get their views in to the Council. As usual, we have listed all the answers that came from at least one in 10 children filling in our survey.

Ways for children who aren't on the Children in Care Council to get their views in to their Children in Care Council

Website	27% of children
Through social workers or care workers	18% of children
By email	17% of children
By letter	17% of children
Through a newsletter	15% of children
By telephone	14% of children
By questionnaires/ consultations	14% of children
Through a magazine	12% of children
At meetings or visits	11% of children
At activities or events	10% of children
Through special groups	10% of children

Clearly, **websites were the main way that Children in Care Councils had set up for children who weren't members to get their views to the Children in Care Council.** Children in Care Council members thought social workers, reviewing officers and carers would play a part in bringing in the views of children they were working with. Some had newsletters or more general magazines that invited children in care to feed their views in, and Children in Care Councils could be contacted by email, letter or telephone. Some had set up special groups, surveys, visits

or events to find out the views and concerns of children in care more widely than the ones on the Children in Care Council itself.

Examples of how Children in Care Councils can get the views of children in care who are not members

‘To go round each children’s home with a box and children should put their ideas in the box’

‘By letter or email or via our future website. Phone contacts of team leaders’

‘At various events we run surveys’

‘Focus groups’

‘Write back/fill in the reply slip on the back of our newly formed magazine, which is posted to every looked after child in the borough’

‘It’s not something happening at the moment but we’ll look into it’

Next we asked about how much difference the opinions of the children and young people on Children in Care Councils made to what happened for children in care in their areas. We had already asked young people at our Science Museum conference what they thought about this – but in the survey of all members of Children in Care Councils we also asked young people to tell us if they were not sure about whether or not their Council made a difference.

Around half (49% of all 285 children in the survey, 51% of the 278 members who answered this particular question) thought that their Children in Care Council’s opinions made a lot of difference to what happened for children in care in their areas. As many as 16% (just over one in six) of members were not sure whether or not their Children in Care Council’s opinions made a difference. At the Science Museum conference, 66% of the representatives of Children in Care Councils who voted had said their Children in Care Council’s opinions made a difference, compared with 79% of all Children in Care Council members who answered a similar question (77% of all 285 children) in our larger survey.

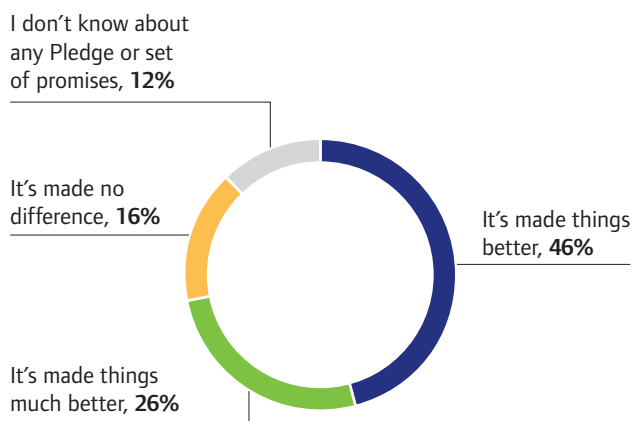


More key issues

We also used our survey of Children in Care Council members to ask about some other key issues that the Government has said it wants to think about as part of the ministerial stocktake of the care system.

Firstly, we knew that each local authority had been asked to make a set of promises, a 'Pledge', to all the children in its care. We also found out in doing this report that these Pledges were the thing that had been discussed most at the new Children in Care Councils. In the survey we asked whether Pledges had made things better for children in care. The next figure shows the answers from Children in Care Council members.

Has your council's Pledge (or other set of promises with a different name) made things better for children and young people in care?



Figures based on responses of the 243 children who answered this question. Of the 285 children who took part in the survey 42 did not respond.

Overall, 72% of the Council members who answered this question thought their authority's Pledge had made things better or much better for children in care. Only 16% thought their authority's Pledge had made no difference to children in care.

Although it was one of the subjects often discussed in Children in Care Councils, and apart from the 42 children who didn't answer this particular question at all, **one in eight members of those Councils did not know about any Pledge or set of promises to children in care in their authorities.**

Next we asked about a very different subject. One of the subjects that has been put forward to be considered in the Minister's stocktake of care is the problem of children and young people running away from care. We asked what people in our survey thought were the main reasons for children and young people running away from care, and then what they thought could be done to help stop children and young people running away. Again, we did not suggest any answers.

We received answers to this question from 280 people. Here is the list of all the reasons that came to us from at least one in 10 children and young people who answered this question.

The main reasons for children and young people running away from care	
Unhappy with placement	31% of children
Unhappy with carers' treatment	29% of children
Not being listened to	19% of children
Feeling generally bad	18% of children
Being scared or afraid	13% of children
Missing family	13% of children
Feeling generally unhappy	11% of children

Based on responses from 280 children, who identified 28 reasons. Five children did not answer this question.

The next most usual reason, which just missed this list, was simply wanting to go home. Three reasons that we have found in our past consultations were given, but by fewer than one in 10 children. Seven per cent of children answering this question in the survey (20 children) said children and young people may run away because of the rules and restrictions in their placement. Six per cent (18 children) gave being bullied as a reason for some children and young people running away. Only two children suggested that children might run away because they had been separated from their brothers or sisters.

Few children in the survey thought children ran away from care for reasons other than worries or problems. Five per cent (13 children) said children or young people might run away because of peer pressure, and three children gave 'rebellion' as a reason.

Looking at all the reasons given, they seem to fall into three main categories. First are problems to do with the placement children are in, such as being unhappy with the placement or the way they are treated by their carers. Other examples were feeling that there were too many rules and restrictions in the placement, and finding it difficult to settle in to a new placement.

The second category is to do with how the child or young person feels generally. These reasons for running away included feeling bad, scared, unhappy or afraid, or looking for love and attention. The third category was where children or young people would run away to go somewhere else, such as home.

Examples of why children run away from care

'Angry with care home, they run away because there is no one to talk to'

'Arguments'

'Because some people don't feel safe, or unhappy, or not treated well'

'Because they are not allowed to sleep out without CRB. Not as much freedom as their peers'

'Because they don't want to be there, don't like it'

'Being treated differently and feeling like they are different, missing their real parents'

'Bullying, confused, don't get on with carer, want to see family or siblings'

'Depressed'

'Don't feel like their needs are being met. Feel like they aren't cared about. Running away means they don't have to deal with the situation any more'

'Home sickness, poor care'

'Want to go back to their family'

'To get away from problems or to see family'

'They can't cope with things that are happening. Don't feel anyone's listening to them'

'They haven't built a relationship with their foster carer as they feel that they're against them and lonely. I should know'

'They are running not only from something but in some cases to something'

There were five suggested ways of helping to stop children and young people running away from care that came from at least one in 10 of the people who answered the question. Here is the list.

What can be done to help stop people running away from care?	
Always listen to children	from 66 children
More help and support for children	from 59 children
Talking to children in private	from 49 children
Better carers or placements	from 35 children
More consideration of feelings and needs	from 29 children

We only had suggestions from 76 children and young people for this question (although between them they gave us 276 answers, which added up to 37 different suggestions). The list is a mixture of **three key things that might help stop children and young people feeling they need to run away from care. The first is listening and talking to children more about their feelings, needs, worries and concerns, including giving them the chance to talk about these in private. The second is giving more help and support in placements when children need it. The third is making sure that placements, and especially the carers there, are the right ones for the child.**

Examples of what can be done to stop children running away from care

'A constant flow of stable communication between carers, social workers and children to ensure that all needs and thoughts catered for'

'A buddying system or big brother scheme'

'Be treated as an individual'

'Ask the young people if they're happy where they're living, don't constantly move them around'

'Being able to talk to someone you trust about your problems, feeling comfortable with the people you live with'

'Closer monitoring'

'At the beginning of a placement... ground rules must be set and agreed'

'Getting people to help like counsellors'

'Give much info as possible. Place young people in the right placement. Give them a voice to what happens to themselves'

'Give them more time with their social workers so they build a relationship so when they have a problem they don't run'

'Give them options of people to talk about problems'

'Give them placement choice, take their view into account'

'Have looked after children that have sort of been in the same condition that can talk to each other'

'Care leavers should be given jobs to mentor children in care. To talk, listen, give advice and spend time with them'

'Let them try it somewhere else'

'Listen to why they are running away and try to understand and [compromise]'

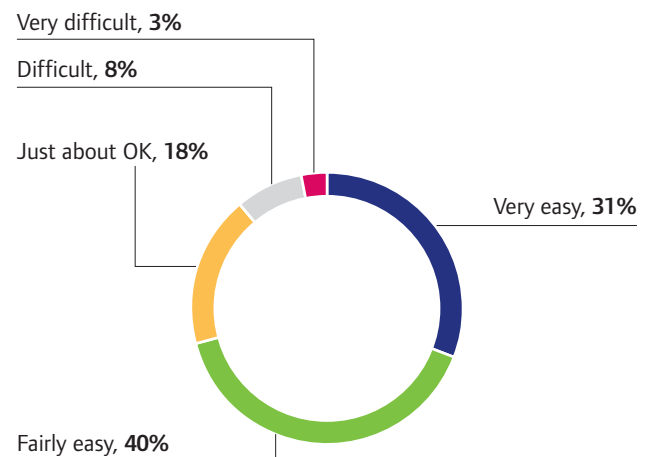
'Taking their views more about where they would like to be placed to minimise the risk of absconding. Also having an idea where you're going and if possible meet your carers and view placement beforehand'



Next we turned to another completely different subject that is important for the Minister's stocktake. We asked how easy members of Children in Care Councils thought it was to get hold of an advocate in their areas, to help speak for children and help them make a complaint if they needed to. Children in care have a right to have the help of an advocate if they are making a complaint about their care.

The next figure shows the answers.

How easy is it for children and young people in your council area to get hold of an advocate to help them make a complaint?



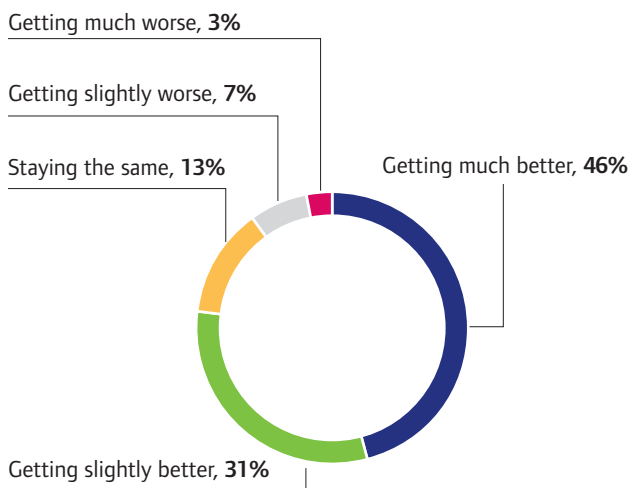
Based on responses of the 271 children who answered this question. Of the 285 children who returned a questionnaire 14 did not respond.

Seventy-one per cent of children and young people answering this question in the survey thought it was either fairly easy or very easy for children to get hold of an advocate to help them if they made a complaint. Although children have a legal right to have an advocate for this, just over one in 10 (11%) thought it would be difficult or very difficult to get hold of one.



As our very last question, we asked whether members of Children in Care Councils thought that, generally, things are getting better or worse for children in care these days. The figure shows their assessment.

Are things generally getting better or worse for children in care these days?



Based on responses from 272 children who answered this question. Of the 285 children who returned a questionnaire 13 did not respond.

According to the Children in Care Council members who responded to our survey, this is a time of change for children in care. **A very large majority thought things are changing, either for the better or for the worse. Just over three quarters (77%) thought things are generally getting either slightly better or much better for children in care, and one in 10 thought things are getting either slightly worse or much worse for children in care.**

Last word

And lastly, a final request from a young person we consulted.

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



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Royal Exchange Buildings
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Manchester
M2 7LA

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