

Over the next 5 years the Children's Commissioner will publish regular State of Nation reports into aspects of children's lives.

This first report focuses on the experiences of children in care and care leavers.

The Children and Families Act 2014 says that the Children's Commissioner must have a special focus on children in or leaving care; living away from home or receiving social care services (as set out in Part 6, Section 8A) as well as promoting and protecting the rights of all children in England.

As part of her work, the Children's Commissioner makes sure that decision makers listen to what children and young people say about things that affect their lives and take their rights, views and interests into account.

The Children's Commissioner involves children in care in the shaping of her work and priorities as part of her young people's advisory groups, Amplify and Young Amplify, and as part of young expert groups which focus on specific areas of her work. The Care Monitor Survey has been supported by a specific young expert group for children with experience of care.

State of the Nation: Report 1

Children in Care and Care Leavers Survey 2015

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Office of the Children's Commissioner



Children's Commissioner

**Children's
Commissioner**
Promoting and protecting children's rights

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Foreword from the Children's Commissioner for England

Foreword from members of the Children's Commissioner's Young Expert Group



I am grateful to the many children and young people who took the time to complete our survey. They have given us so much detail about their lives in care, taking the time to write their views in full. Their remarkable words will help us all understand very clearly what is happening for them.

I'm encouraged to see so many children making positive comments about their care and they were very clear about what works well. They also said a great deal about how to improve children's experiences, from understanding from the very start the reasons for the decisions being made about them, to what it means to be living in the right place – and the wrong place – and what you need when you leave care. They were clear about what made it possible to feel safe and what it is like to feel unsafe, and to feel good about the future or worried about it. They express so clearly what a difference it makes to feel supported, heard and understood and the importance of being able to make sense of and recover from the past.

While it may be the case that young people who were positive about their care might be more likely to complete our questions than those who are unhappy, their views show what is needed for all children in care and those leaving care. The importance of relationships with people who care, continued support, stability and a 'normal' life, as well as the need for help with worries and the continuing problems which are faced by young people in care, come across very clearly in their own words.

Anne Longfield OBE
Children's Commissioner for England



Rebeka (21)

The Young Expert Group is made up from care experienced young people from around England. Our goal is to be listened to, make a difference and to make the care system a better place to be in. I have learnt and gained so much from the process. I felt it was important for all of the group as we all understand more about why the survey was carried out and what it means.

As a group we worked closely with the Children's Commissioner and her team to develop the survey and contributed to the interviews for tender, the way questions should be asked and how it was written and promotion for the whole thing. As a group we have all seen the differences we've made just by being a part of the process but a few examples are, we all agreed that there needs to be the use of boxes to allow young people to write their own answers in and not just a tick a box. We all brought our experiences and ways of thinking to each session and changed the way the team think in terms of language, attraction and engagement.

This report should be taken note of and listened to because how will the lives of our children and young people change if you don't listen to them or even ask them? Our service needs to adapt to the changing needs of the young people.

Sarah (14)

The Young Expert Group wanted to help change the lives of children and young people going into care and already in care. We got a group together from all over the country and worked together as a team to come up with ways to change care for children and young people. The reason we did this survey was to see what children and young people thought about care, and what could be done better and what should change.

We helped design the survey and what it looked like and looked at the results from the survey. Many of the responses were positive and a lot of children and young people feel happy and safe where they live. Some don't feel safe about where they are living because of the location. Education was also really good as lots of children and young people are happy about their education and happy with their grades.

The results of the survey are about wanting to make children and young people have a great life and not just about what they have experienced in the past. They want to have normal lives like very one else and don't want to be different. The State of Nation Report is part of changing their lives for the better.

Key messages

Many children are having a good experience of care

- There were many positive messages about care which show clearly what children want and need.
- Most felt they were living in the right place for them and that meant they were treated with respect, listened to, loved and felt part of a family – including in a children's home.
- Nearly half felt they often felt good about the future: this relied on good relationships, and stability.
- Moves had been right for just over half – they had been managed well, with children able to take important possessions with them.
- Many messages about leaving care: just over half felt they left at the right time.

A significant number of young people are not getting the care they need

- Just over 50% of children did not understand why they came into care. If we were to generalise this figure to the general population of children and young people in the care system this would be more than 35,000 children.
- Those who did not feel they were living in the right place felt they were not part of the family or did not get the help they needed.
- Those for whom moves had been a bad experience did not have enough time or preparation and important relationships were disrupted.
- The importance of feeling safe: a minority felt unsafe in the area they lived in or had inadequate support. Being understood was vital so that carers knew when you were worried or unsafe.
- Only 46% knew how to get an advocate. If we were to use this figure as an estimate for the general population of children in care, this would suggest that 38,500 children do not know how to get an advocate.
- Worries about the future were often about not being ready to move on and not having enough support.
- A third did not think they left care at the best time.

What makes care good

- Being listened to; having good and supportive relationships with caring adults; making progress personally with your life; having contact with birth family; being ordinary; normal; feeling a member of the family; stability.

What would make care better?

- Being listened to, supported for as long as you need, being understood, believed in and encouraged. Having continuing relationships with carers and professionals and consistency, stability and a sense of belonging. Making sense of the past was very important for many: being able to understand what had happened and getting help with the past.

Introduction

The most recent figures show that, at any one time, there are about 69,000 children in care and around 98,000 children experience care over the year. The majority are in foster care and around 6,300 live in children's homes. For many, the system does a good job, providing greater safety and security than that which could be provided by birth parents.

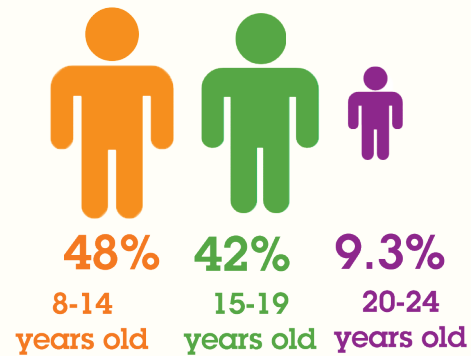
However, some children do not find the stability they need in the care system and many can be very vulnerable because of their life experiences. Some are less likely than other children to achieve academic success or benefit from stable relationships and some are more likely to have problems with crime, drugs and mental health.

The Children's Commissioner has previously called for a review of children's services and the implementation of a cross-Government improvement plan to vastly improve outcomes for children in care. The views and concerns of children in care and care leavers that have emerged from this survey make it clear this review is needed; in addition, the findings expressed in the survey, and set out in this report lead the Children's Commissioner to argue that:

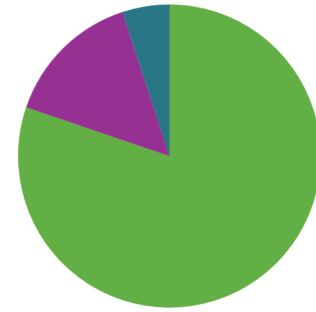
1. **It is essential that children's views are sought and influence all decisions that are made about them and that all decisions are fully explained to them.**
2. **Support for all care leavers is extended up to 25 years of age.**
3. **Every child in care should have at least one continuing and consistent relationship with someone who is there for them through their time in care and into adulthood.**
4. **Services should enable children to keep their social worker for longer through their time in care.**
5. **Every child in care should have access to high quality therapeutic care that will enable them to recover from past harm and build resilience and emotional wellbeing.**

This report is first in a series of detailed briefings on the findings of the survey which will cover safety, education, leaving care and other critical issues. This series will do justice to the depth of information we collected from the survey and will set the scene for what life is like for children in care today in their own words. The series will focus on what is important to them and what they tell us will help them to achieve the best possible outcomes they can. Our aim is to bring their needs, voices and rights to the fore of the national agenda.

How old are you?

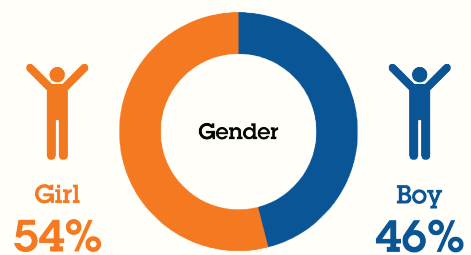


n: 1936



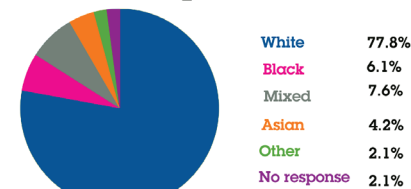
n: 1644

Are you a...



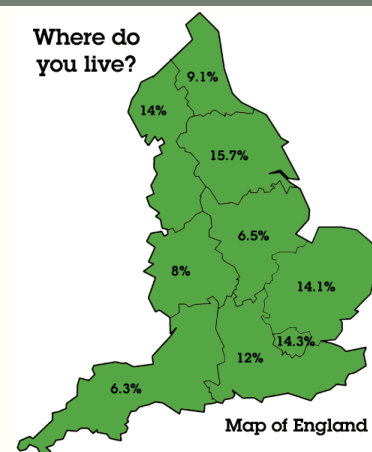
n: 1999

Ethnicity

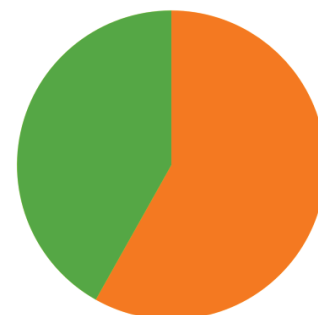


n: 1273

Where do you live?



n: 2097



18.2% boys had a disability. 13.1% girls

The survey

The State of the Nation Report is the 2015 version of the 'Care Monitor' survey of children in care and care leavers which was originally run annually by the Children's Rights Director. With the reformation of the Children's Commissioner's remit under the Children and Families Act 2014, the Commissioner took over the survey. It is an important part of her remit to take particular regard to the rights of children who are living away from home.

The development and administration of the survey, and the analysis was undertaken through a partnership with the University of Nottingham School of Sociology and Social Policy. The survey was launched by the Children's Commissioner in November 2014 and ran for three months until February 2015. It was conducted online, although a large number of hard copies were distributed and collated, and an easy read version was also made available. Upon request, the survey was also produced in braille.

In total 2936 surveys were collected – of these, 1667 were fully completed and 1269 were partially completed. Figures quoted in this report show the percentages of those who responded to that question, with the base figure cited. An example of the survey and the data we collected is available on our website.

In completing the survey we were indebted to the immense amount of work that local authorities committed to distributing the survey. During the running time of the survey we also surveyed some of these authorities and distributed a 'top tips' guide to promoting and supporting the survey to children and young people in care and leaving care.

Children with a disability were OLDER than those without

15.8 years to 14.1 years



Those with a disability were slightly more likely to be placed in a children's home (24.7% vs 17.2%)

87.9% vs 69.6%

Children who were placed as the result of a court order were more likely to be placed in a foster home than those placed by voluntary agreement

14.6 years old

Average age of children placed in foster care

13 years old

Average age of children placed in children's homes

Coming into care

Almost one fifth of the children completing the relevant questions of the survey had been in care less than one year (18.9%), just over a quarter (27.1%) had been in care for three to five years and over a third (34.3%) for over five years. Over half the children who said what they felt on entering care said they were scared (53.6%) and 41.9% felt sad.

"I was young and I don't remember anyone explaining what was happening."

"I felt scared and sad, I wanted to be taken away from my mum as she was hurting me and my brother but was scared what was going to happen."

Just over a half (50.9%) said that they did not understand why they were coming into care at the time, and some still did not.

"No one told me or my brother why we was getting put into care. We still don't know to this day. We have asked our social worker/workers why we were put into care and they weren't too sure themselves. So we kind of got put into care for no reason..."

The vast majority of children thought someone should have provided them with an explanation.

"If I had a social worker and someone told me what was going on. My sister requested for someone to tell us (I still didn't understand) but they should of told us anyway. You don't just pick three kids up dump them somewhere and not tell them the reason..."

"The reason why I didn't understand was because I didn't know why I was leaving my mom and dad. The thing that would have help me understand is if my social worker told me why I was leaving my mom and dad and so if my social worker told me where I was going. (She didn't tell me). I was really scared."

Those children who came into care (became 'looked after') as a result of a voluntary agreement were less likely to report they were too young to understand and more likely to report that they understood why they came into care.

"I was very young at the time but my foster carers and social worker explained to me in a way that I understood."

Did you understand why you came into care?



Yes No Not Sure

n: 1873

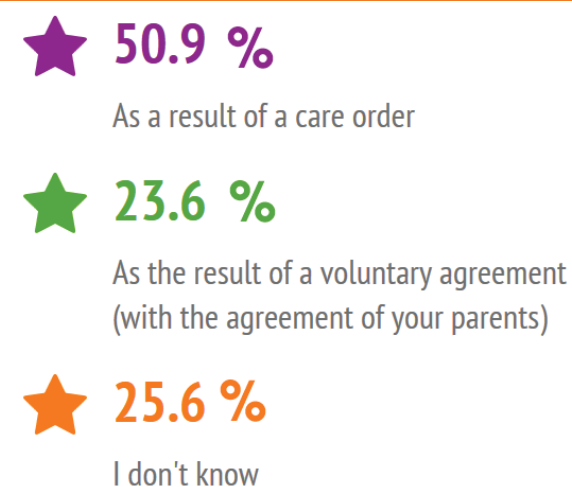
When you first came into care, how did you feel?



n: 1879

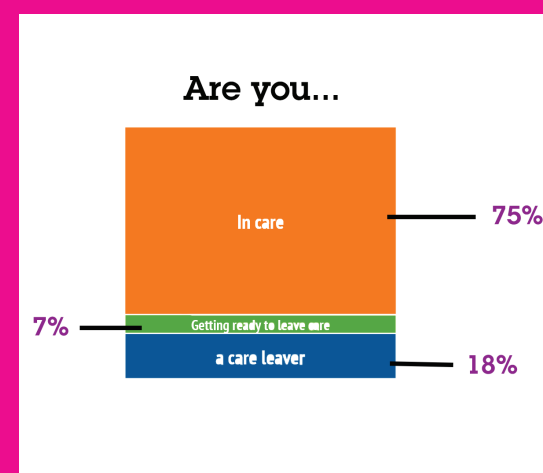
Coming into care

Were you taken into care....?



n: 1968

Care status



n: 1979

Do you live...

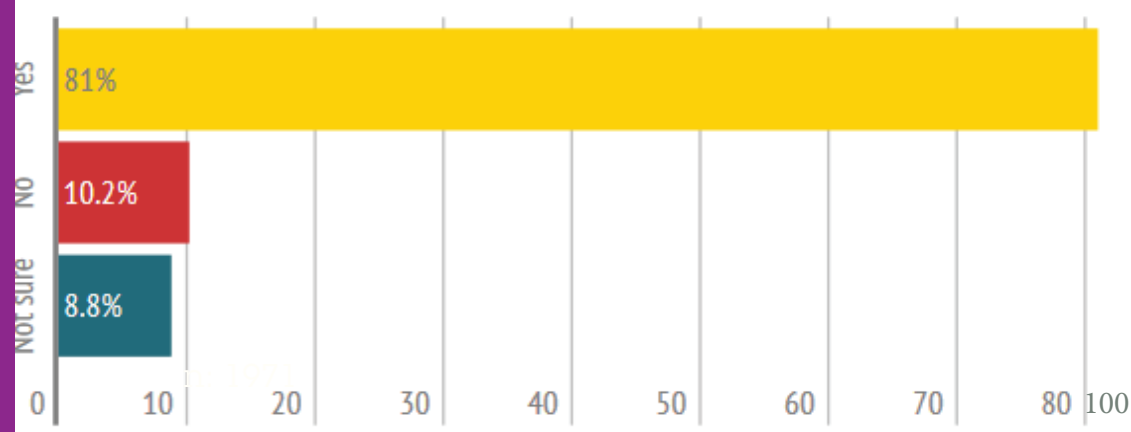


At home, with your mum or dad with relatives
 in a children's home in a foster home in a special school
 in a secure setting (for example... in a hostel
 in a flat or house you share wit... in your own flat or house
 in a bed and breakfast Other I am homeless

n: 1971

Living in the right place

Do you think the place where you are living now is right for you?



n: 1934

Living in the right place

Of the children that told us about where they were living, over half (59%) were in foster placements and 12% were in children's homes. 31% were living outside their local authority area. The overwhelming majority (81%) thought they were living in the right place for them and could say exactly why:

"The people that I live with are really nice and treat you with respect. They also treat you as they would with any other child."

"I like living where I am because my carers listen to me if I need anyone to talk to. They help me with my work and take me out to different places so I gain experience of other things."

"I feel safe, I am cared for e.g. fed, washed, clean clothes, clean bedding, listened to, not pushed away, doing things with my foster family, having fun, being loved and wanted."

Feeling that you were part of a family was an important reason for thinking you were in the right place...and not just for children in foster care.

Living in a children's home

"Because I feel like I am part of the family which I have always wanted. I get on with everyone in the house and I just love it here, they treat me like a normal 14 year old which I like."

"The home is more family orientated than bigger care homes. My carers really know me well so they can give me support, attention and care that I need."

Living in foster care

"The carers I live with and have been for more than eight years now treat me as one of their own and to them I am family and not someone in care, they have helped me through everything no matter how hard it may get, they meet my needs as my own person as we as humans don't learn to cope in the same way. I have grown up within (local authority) since I was put within care at around about age four so I have no need to be back within London."

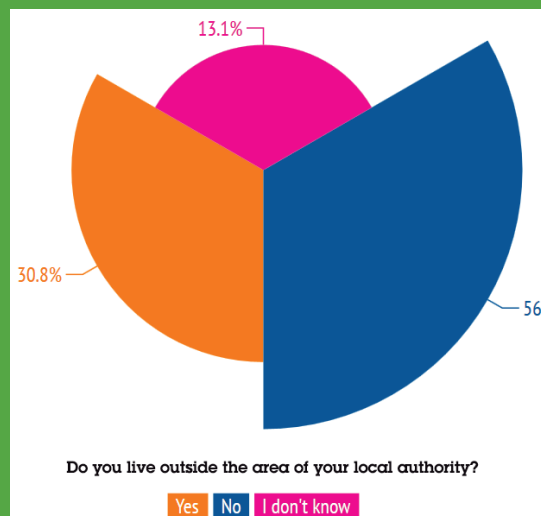
Not living in the right place

If you live in your own flat or house, do you...



n: 2776

Living in the right place



n: 1912

However, 10% of children and young people said that where they lived was not right for them and the main reasons stated were that they: did not feel they were listened to; were not helped; lack freedom; lack trust; do not get on with carers; feel they do not belong; are not living with their birth family; lack of contact with birth family; are located too far away from family, friends, school or college; or live in an isolating environment.

"I don't get along with my foster carer or her daughters and I spend a lot of the time on my own or outside of the house. I also find that I try to spend as much time out of the house as possible which says that I don't like being in the house. I also don't have the permission to be in the house on my own and I don't have a key either for reasons that have not been explained to me which gives me another reason to not get along with my placement."

"I don't feel part of my foster parents' family. Also I feel like they cause arguments when they have a go at me. I feel like they don't care or love me like my old foster mum did."

"Because I don't get the help I need and everyone keeps breaking their promises. That really makes me upset. I just wish I could go home to my mum."

"I strongly feel that the only right place for me is home. I desperately want to go home, it would mean the world if I could."

"Unable to have the freedom that other people my age have."

"Because I feel it is too far away from my Mums."

"It's too far from underground station and too far to get my college. Also my classes start very early every day."

Moving

 **49.7%**

reported that they had not been moved within the previous two years

 **39.6%**

had moved between 1 and 3 times

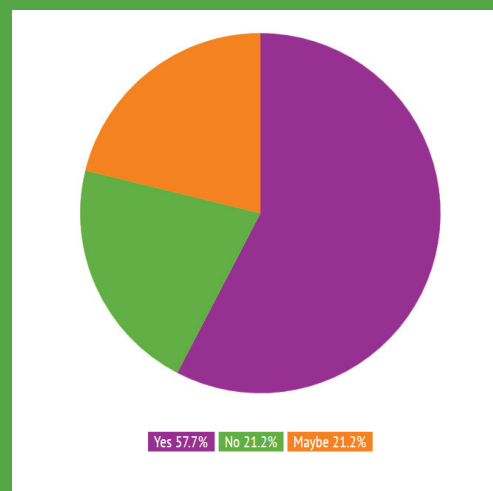
 **10.7%**

4 or more times

n: 1696

Moving

Were you happy to move?



n: 2936

Almost half of the children (49.7%) reported that they had not been moved within the previous two years, however 39.6% had moved between one and three times and 10.7% four or more times.

Over half reported that they were happy to move (57.7%) and by far the majority (83.5%) reported they were able to take things of importance with them when they moved. However for those who were unable to do that or who didn't want to move it was more difficult. Children wanted a chance to visit; to know more about the placement beforehand; to have more choice; to be told of the move beforehand and for their views to be listened to. There was a strong message that many did not feel they had enough time to say goodbye for instance, so that important relationships were disrupted.

We asked what might have helped:

"If I was told before I moved I could have taken my most sentimental possessions."

"Nothing would have helped. I would have loved to have stayed with the foster carers. I didn't feel at all ready as it was shortly after a court case and changing over to a PA. Things were happening too quickly which was emotionally difficult."

"More time to decide. I didn't want to move. More support. Could of waited till after my gcse exams had finished. Resulting in low grades."

"It would have helped if I was included in the discussions and decisions that professionals involved made for me. I would have been happier if I had a say and somebody asked me what would I like, where would I like to live. Even if professionals felt that they could not accommodate my wishes for whatever reason, I would feel that my wishes and feelings would be valued and I would feel listened to."

"Having my sisters with me instead of in [town a] and [town b]. So basically being pulled apart by the ones I love at such a young age!"

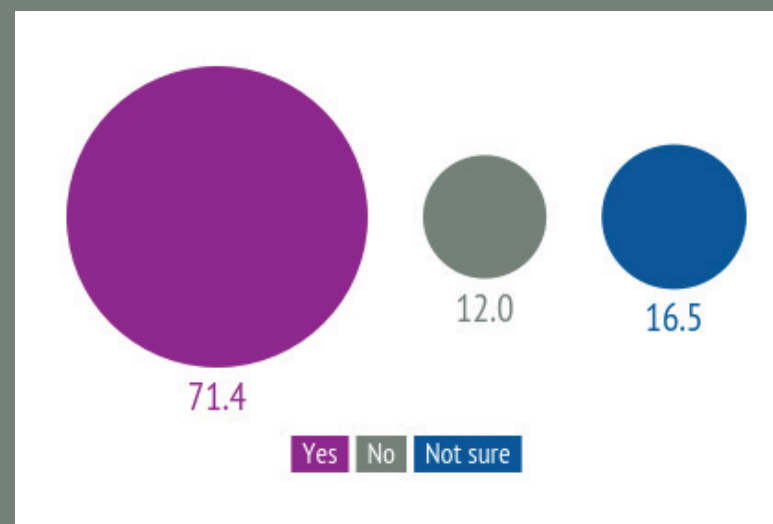
How safe do you feel in the place where you live?



n: 1690

Feeling safe

Do those who look after you know when you are worried, or feel unsafe?



n: 1639

Feeling safe

By far the majority of children and young people answering 'How safe do you feel in the place where you live' stated that they felt very safe (76.95%) or fairly safe (18.9%). Only a small minority felt unsafe (2.9%) or very unsafe (1.4%). Children and young people had a clear idea what was needed:

Support

"...the support I get from my carers, and know whilst I am in their care I will be safe."

"That I have safety around me, have a good foster carer who makes sure I am safe."

"...staff/keyworker has put boundaries in place to keep me safe."

The area you live in

Care leavers were the group most likely to cite this as important in terms of feeling safe. This group are the least likely to feel as if they have someone watching out for them: this was a recurrent theme for all other groups in making them feel safe.

"The people that live around my area are a lot older than me, they take drugs and threaten me sometimes..."

"I do not always feel safe, sometimes I feel that the area isn't always safe..."

"I've been assaulted and threatened. Moving out the area would make me feel safer..."

Being understood

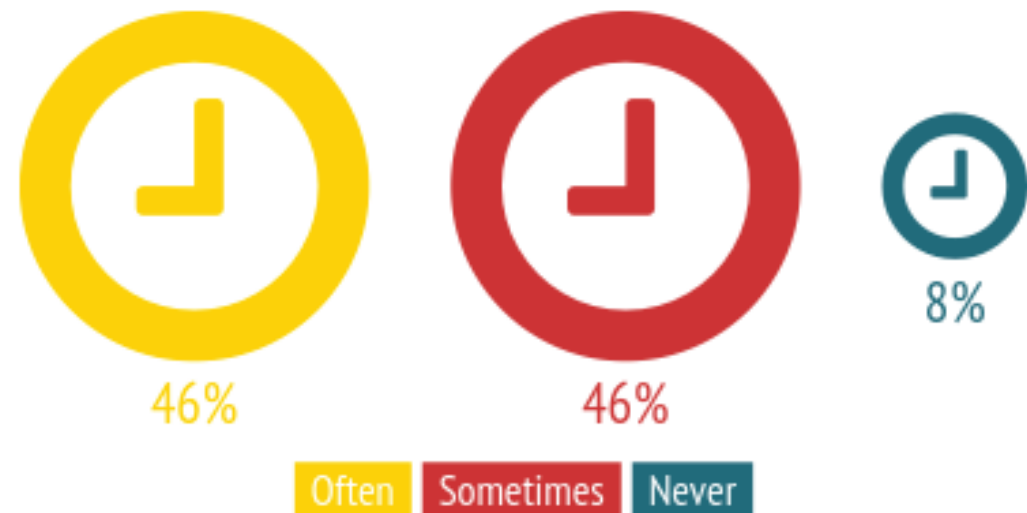
Most children (71.4%) said 'yes' to the question 'Do those who look after you know when you are worried, or feel unsafe?' However, it is concerning that 16.5% stated that weren't sure and 12.0% said those who looked after them did not know when they were worried or felt unsafe. Of the children answering 'Yes' to question 65 by far the majority were children living in foster care (476). Fewer children living in residential homes (83) or care leavers (7) answered, perhaps suggesting that children living in foster care can feel more confident that they are 'known' by their carers.

"Because they never ask, HOW YOU DOING TODAY, FEELING ALRIGHT?"

"Help to tell my IRO something that I felt uncomfortable saying. They just help with everything I can't do."

The future

How often do you feel good about the future?



n: 1675

"I often feel good about the future"

In answer to the question 'How often do you feel good about the future?' 46% said 'often' and 46% said 'sometimes'. Worryingly, 8% said 'never' in response to this question.

Often

Those who said they 'often' feel good about the future talked about relationships with carers; feeling they were doing well in their lives; and being determined to do so.

"It makes me feel happy that I know I can stay at my current placement until I am 18."

"I will leave foster care with all the skills I need in life."

"I will be happy if my placement becomes permanent. I do well at school and in my life ahead."

"Because my foster family tell me that I will always be important to them and that they will always be there to help me."

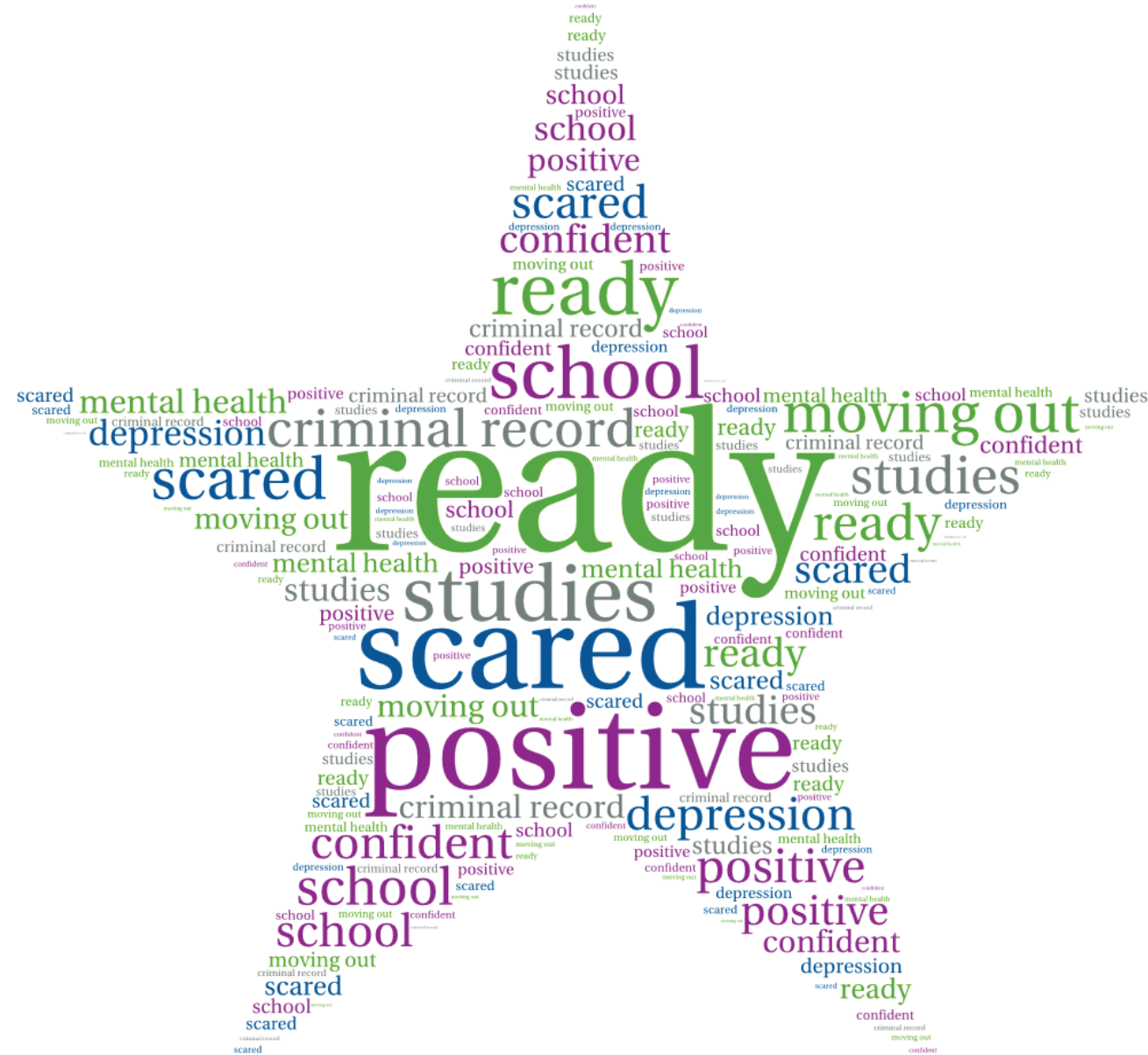
"Because I am in the highest maths group and I am doing well with my work I know that I am no longer going to put myself at risk or harm."

"I am going to be successful because I have lived the bad life and want to live in the good life. I have lots of drive as shown by my work in the community."

"Because I gonna be a hard working person to care for people like the way social services did for me."

"The past seven months I have been thinking positively about my future, leaving care, driving, carrying on with my studies and my job. Feeling more like a normal child and not just a 'looked after child' that's been predicated a bad future from government statistics."

The future



“I sometimes/never feel good about the future”

Those who replied they ‘sometimes or never’: felt alone, worried about not being ready, about not having enough help and support, not knowing where they will be living, about having mental health issues, and being alone.

“Because I am worried about moving out and having to live on my own without a choice in the matter, people who are not in care get to stay with their parents until they feel ready to move out and I feel that I am nowhere near ready to leave but I don’t have a choice in the matter.”

“My behaviour is letting me down and I have a criminal record. I got it at the age of nine.”

“Because I’m 21 a single parent and I don’t get much help and I struggle a lot but no one helps and every time I try my best something or someone brings me down.”

“I have bad mental health and can’t go to work or college due to anxiety. But I’ve had no help.”

“I have depression about my body. Work over 50 hours a week and study and disabled but not entitled to any help or had a social worker as i am classed as low risk...so wrong.”

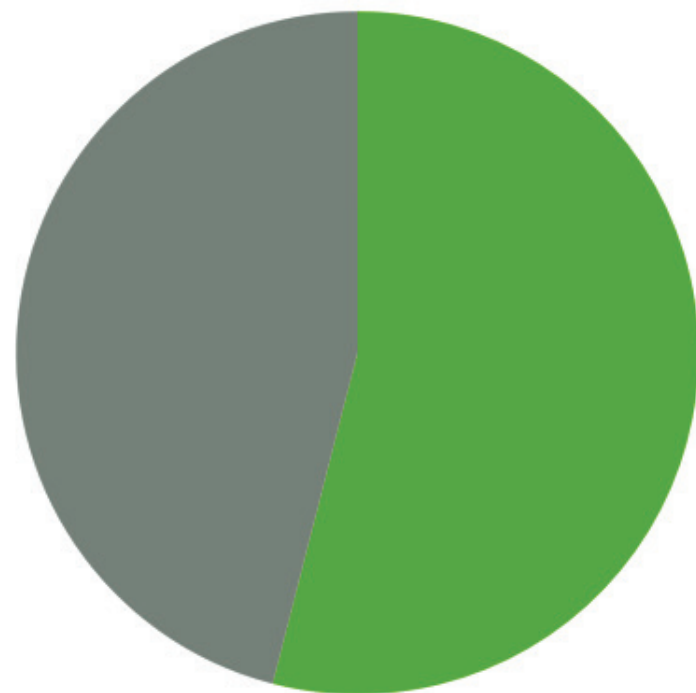
“As a confident independent individual doing a law degree I feel worried that at the most crucial stage I will be unsupported by anyone since when I leave education I will no longer have a “care leaving social worker.”

“Because I can’t wait to get out of prison but don’t know where I am going upon release.”

“I’m scared of who to choose, mum or dad.”

Leaving care

Did you leave care
at the right time?



Yes No

n: 2667

Leaving care

The right time?

Just over half 54% of care leavers stated that they left care at the right time.

"I left when I was 19 to go to university. I felt like I was ready to go off on my own and experience university life properly in halls...my foster mum taught me how to cook, do my washing etc and I had one of the best years of my life but I am glad I am now back in London living back with my foster mum in assisted living. I missed her and the family environment and as for my education I feel it more beneficial to me if I am here because of the stability it enables my life to have (I think I possibly overdid it at uni in regards to too much freedom)."

"I had a lack of independence age 17 whilst in foster care. I was restricted by policy and rules and couldn't do many things which friends my age also did. I had more freedom and support when I moved in supported lodgings."

Not being ready: Just under a third, 30% of young people, said they had not left care at the right time for them and a further 16% reported being unsure. The reasons were mainly feeling settled in their placement and being forced to leave it before they were ready.

"If I could have stayed at the hostel I was living in for another year as I felt I was not ready for the responsibility and I was in a stable environment where I was happy."

"I would of like to of stayed with my foster mum and dad, I feel that young people such as myself feel at 18 is hard to become independent on your own and to have to leave care just after our 18th birthday..."

"I wanted to stay put, but because my carer would not receive funding they said I could not stay with them."

"How can you expect a child to move at the age of 18 and think that they are an adult, is your child an adult at that age?"

Many wrote of the abrupt withdrawal of support:

"My placement broke down and they had no placements so I had no choice I was forced to grow up."

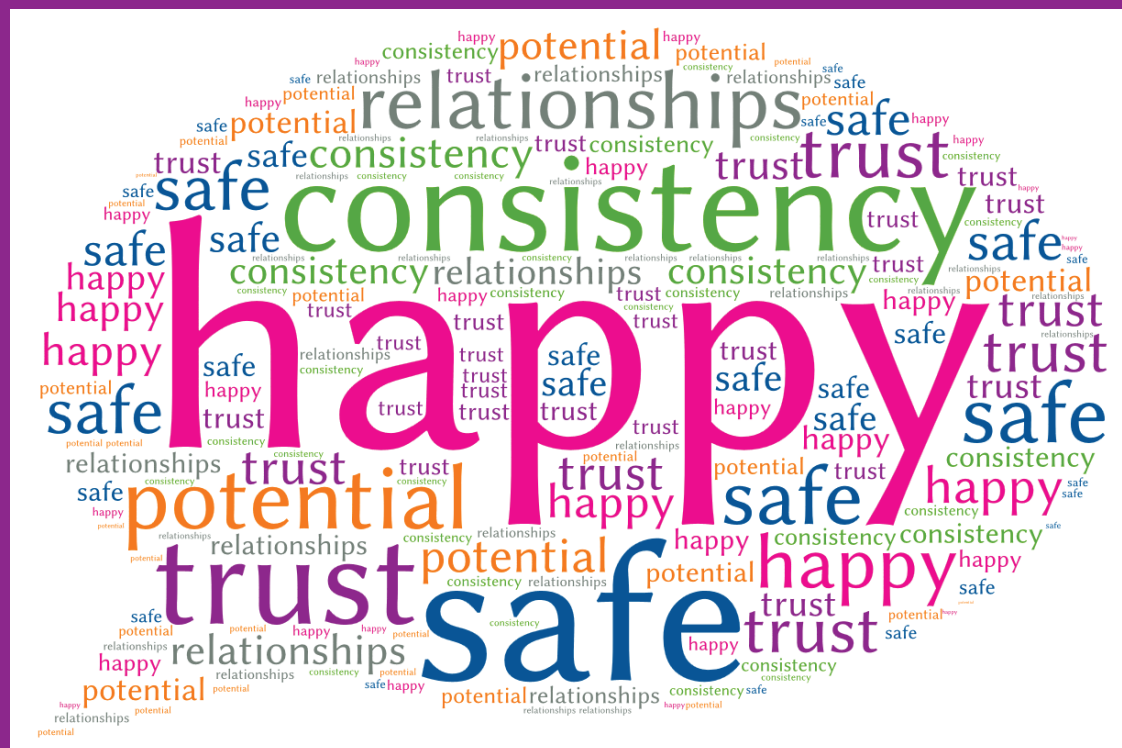
Leaving care



18%

of people who completed the survey
were care leavers

Leaving care



"I loved [being] in a care home...which was suddenly closed down, I then moved to a friend's house who was an escort where I then became an escort for the time I lived there."

The best thing

Like children in care, those getting ready to leave care expressed what worked best in terms of being listened to, taken seriously and having an influence over their futures. But many also wrote of the importance of professionals, foster carers and support workers in their lives. More young people expressed appreciation of the opportunity to remain in foster care or semi-independent accommodation as they reached adulthood than did those who indicated their welcome of a new found freedom having left care. There was pride in making progress but a value was placed on having supportive adults around you.

"I progressed onto the level 3 BTEC diploma in Health and Social Care and became a student ambassador at my college. I also have close contact with those I care about and have been assigned to a really good and consistent aftercare worker."

"Over the past year the best thing for me has been my support worker with 14+ with all the support she has given me I feel like you have built up a good relationship with her and I feel like if I have any queries I can always go to her about them so it has been nice to build up a good relationship with someone who I can trust."

"Being able to come back and live with my foster mum in an assisted living placement. Because of my age (20) generally I do not think this happens a lot but I am extremely happy. [The local authority] have worked something out and allowed this as I feel this is the best thing for me. I'm safe, happy and at my most comfortable here and it sets me up to be in an environment where I can work hard and achieve my full potential at college/university. I think it's important to understand that just because you reach the age of 18 and are supposedly adults, not everyone is ready to go off into the world on their own."



What has worked best?



What has worked best?

There were a wide range of answers but a number of common themes from children and young people in response to this question: being listened to; having choices; feeling a member of a foster family; being treated as an ordinary child or young person; having contact with birth families; having positive relationships with foster carers and/or social workers; making new friends or having good ones; receiving needed support; things going well at school; having their own space; enjoying leisure activities; and a general sense of life going well.

Children and young people also talked of the importance of stability for them:

"I am very pleased that I have a lot of choice to see my family regularly and staying at my same school as I would of when I lived with birth parents I do believe that I am very happy where I am now and that I will stay until I am ready to go."

"The support my support worker has given to me the time and effort she has invested to try and make sure I am getting the best care I need and helping me to trust people again and to try and feel happy."

"Going to a specialist residential School for ASD and SLD and other complex issues, because they really 'get me'!"

"The only thing that has worked well for me since I have been in care is my foster carers. I honestly can't praise them enough. My foster carers are at the heart of my life and everything revolves around them for me which is how I want it. They do everything they can to make sure I am safe and happy/fulfilled and they support me with every decision I make."

"Being in one place and there to not be big changes. Also I remained at my school after coming into care."

"People respecting my judgement."

"Having a voice and being able to make my own decisions..."

"For them to have a voice..."

Making care better

"Not being moved around so much...."

Making care better: support

We asked 'What is the main thing that would make life better for children and young people in care, and for care leavers?' By far the most common comments made by all groups of children were about the need to be listened to, understood and supported in a stable placement with carers who care.

Being listened to

"To know that we are listened to and to let us have a say in what happens in our lives."

"For them to have a voice and be able to take control of their lives without having them decided for them."

Support – for as long as you need it: all groups of children reported on the benefits of having a social worker, key worker or foster carer to support them

"To give more of a chance of a better life no matter what situation a child is in. Be more supportive and never give up on them. That is the whole point of the care system."

"Following leaving care not enough support network was in place, going from 24 hours to support once every three weeks is not acceptable. This is where the system fails miserably, it's like throwing someone into the sea. Support should be tailored to individual needs."

Being understood, believed in and encouraged

"I think having a social worker who truly believes in them, encourages them and motivates them to better themselves, as well as having a positive role model such as someone who has been through the care system and experienced similar things to them."

"Pay more attention to children's emotional and physical needs in care and out, approach and treat young people as individuals not groups. Make clear all rights and options also possibilities and opportunities available for these young people. Always listen and question a young person's needs and take into consideration whichever it is they wish and try to meet those needs."

"To have a family that listen and love and care for you and to make the best of my life."

“Having a long and stable placement...”

“Destroy the stupid stigma”

Making care better



Making care better: stability

Having continuing relationships

“I think the common problem amongst children in care, from my own experiences, the other people’s experiences, and experiences I’ve read in books – us not having consistent care. There are either multiple social workers, or multiple foster carers. This is not healthy for emotional development. I also think there should be more activities to participate in.”

Consistency

“...not changing social workers all the time...not having part time social workers, moving about as little as possible, kids in care need to understand that all families have their ups and downs and they need help to work through them rather than move out at the slightest fall outs.”

Contact with family members was a common theme: for most this was about having more contact:

“Not being moved around so much to be able to stay together with your siblings to see relatives like aunties and uncles to see parents more often. To have the same social worker and get one you like and meet up for good stuff not just meetings for paperwork and reviews.”

Stability and belonging

“Having a long and stable placement where they feel like part of the family and that they are cared for and loved.”

“Not to be take away from foster carers until they are ready.”

Being ‘normal’

The stigma of being in care was a strong theme. Day to day life was affected by the ‘bureaucracy’ of being in care. There was a strong message from those in foster care, who might perhaps have had greater hopes of being in a ‘normal’ environment.

“A bit more privacy from social workers because when they come around all the time you don’t feel like you belong to a family because normal families wouldn’t have a person coming to their house talking to you about being where you are and how you are doing.”

“Destroy the stupid stigma that comes with being in care. I got bullied for being in care for years and I already had (sorry for this) enough shit to deal with. Plus, one of my new friends hasn’t told her parents I’m in care because they’re prejudiced against looked after children. I can’t stress enough how important this is.”

Making care better

Making care better: understanding

Honest explanations

Children wanted a social worker they could rely on to be honest with them and who would help them to understand what might happen next. There was a strong sense that children wanted to be kept informed.

"Tell them what's going on and just keep updating them on new information."

Making sense of the past

In addition to needing to understand what might happen in the future, some children reported needing help to understand their current situation and to make sense of the trauma they had experienced. This was linked with their perceived need for therapeutic and other help and the difficulties in obtaining this. For some this was also about building an identity.

"To make sure they know their story cos how can they make themselves a better person if they don't know what made them the way they r in the first place."

"I think that young people who have difficulty with self-harm or low self-esteem should be able to talk to people who have been through it already but have found ways to get help or who talk to solve the situation so they can feel listened to and not pushed out."

"Provide therapeutic work to every child as it is needed, make sure the Borough you put them in is prepared to handle all their needs mental, emotional and physical. Be more decisive when evidence points to contact not working for child."

"For carers/social workers to look deeper than how a child is coming across at eyes view, if the child might be acting more difficult than usual maybe they should pay attention and instead of moaning all the time actually try and see what's going on in their head, because although the child may have lost everything she/he's ever loved through being in care a couple of years ago or the things that happened to them before they came into care have happened a long time ago does NOT mean that it does not affect the child emotionally and physically every day."

And finally

One care leaver simply said what would make being in care better was **"love!"**

