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Foreword from Dame Rachel de Souza



As the Children's Commissioner for England, my statutory duty, as set out in the Children Act 2004, is to promote and protect the rights of all children, with particular regard to children who are living away from home or receiving social care services. In 2014, under section 2D of Act, the Commissioner's powers were extended to providing advice, assistance, and representation to this group of children, and to care leavers up to the age of 25. This role is fulfilled by my Help at Hand service. It is an integral part of my office and I am proud of the work they do every day to ensure that the rights of vulnerable children and young people are upheld, and their voices heard.

In 2022 the office conducted a review of Help at Hand to consider how the team could reach more children and provide an even better service. Over the past 12 months, the team has been implementing the recommendations of that review, and this report outlines the progress made so far.

It is important to me that the team not only helps the individual children who need it most, but also ensures that their experiences are used to inform the office's research and policy work at a national level. Case examples from Help at Hand have enriched my office's forthcoming report on homeless 16 and 17 year olds, our briefings during the passage of the Illegal Migration Act, and our recent *Disabled children's vision for change*, in addition to my ongoing work on the SEND and Alternative Provision

Improvement Plan and addressing school attendance, particularly for looked after children who are out of school.¹

Following the recommendations of the 2022 review, Help at Hand entered a data sharing agreement with Ofsted, which means the team now receives details of any children's homes that have a provisional rating of inadequate. The team then tries to ensure that all of the children affected are offered advocacy by their local authority. Between April and June 2023, of the 656 children's homes inspected by Ofsted, 84 (13%) had a final inspection judgement of inadequate.² This illustrates the quantity of work the Help at Hand team have taken on and also indicates the scale of change needed to ensure there is the right quality and range of residential provision for children. It is also another reason for ensuring that all children in care have the opportunity to share concerns about their accommodation and other aspects of their lives. This is why I believe so strongly in promoting advocacy and the role Help at Hand can play in this. My forthcoming Advocacy Audit will set out the nationwide state of advocacy for children and young people, including examples of children referred to Help at Hand.

My team had 998 referrals in the period from September 2022 to August 2023. Often, thanks to their intervention, the issues were resolved, and potential breaches of children's rights were addressed. In some instances, I intervened myself, when the issues appeared intractable or the team had not received an adequate response from the key professionals. On 28 occasions over the course of the year, I personally wrote to decision makers, for example, Directors of Children's Services, about children where I had real concerns that their rights were being breached. In many cases, this related to looked after children who were being denied their right to education, often after being moved out of their home area. Many of these children have special educational needs met through Education, Health, and Care Plans (EHCPs), so responsibility for their education is shared between their corporate parent authority and the area where they are living, which manages the EHCP and school admission. Too often I see poor communication between local authorities and confusion about responsibilities and funding, with an unacceptable impact on these children's education. I have also written to local authority and NHS England directors about children with complex needs and trauma who are unable to leave hospital because there is no suitable therapeutic community placement available for them. I am equally

¹ All reports available on the CCo's website: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource>

² Ofsted, 2023, *Inspection outcomes of children's homes*. Available at:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inspection-outcomes-of-childrens-homes/>

concerned about a further group of children living in community placements of various types while subject to deprivation of liberty (DOL) orders. The Help at Hand team can provide assistance to these children if they or their advocates reach out and, although the DOL conditions are subject to court scrutiny, on a number of occasions I have questioned the suitability of the accommodation and arrangements in place for these children. Help at Hand is currently supporting the cross-government Task and Finish project to understand children's experiences of being deprived of their liberty, and how the system can be changed to work better for them.

An awareness of the lived experiences of our most vulnerable children is crucial to helping me understand the problems they are facing and gives so much more force to my conversations with decision-makers at local and national level about what needs to change for them. This year's Help at Hand annual report outlines key themes that have emerged from the team's work, with examples of where they have been able to make a difference. It also sets out the team's plans going forward, including the ongoing work to implement the findings of the 2022 review and ensure they are reaching as many children as possible and making the maximum impact. I will do all I can to support the team with this and look forward to seeing what they can achieve over the next year.

Introduction

Help at Hand is an integral part of the Children's Commissioner's office, with a small team of child rights advisers who provide support to children in care, children in need, those living away from home, and care leavers up to the age of 25. This includes a wide range of children and young people, who may be living in foster care or children's homes, youth custody and hospital, as well as unaccompanied children seeking asylum in Home Office accommodation, children with disabilities, and homeless children and care leavers. The team can be contacted by phone, email, or via the Children's Commissioner's office website, either directly by children or their advocates, professionals, or family members on their behalf.

The team offers information and advice, but can also make direct representations for children and young people whose rights have been breached. This may involve contacting a wide range of professionals and agencies, including social workers and team managers, regional NHS England and Integrated Care Board (ICB) staff, staff in secure settings and, where necessary, government officials in the Department for Education, Home Office and other departments with responsibility for children. They aim to work with professionals to ensure that children's welfare, views, and best interests are kept at the centre of decision-making, and their rights upheld. Often this leads to a reconsideration of decisions and positive outcomes for the child. However, where there are serious concerns which have not been addressed, matters are escalated and, if necessary, the Children's Commissioner writes personally to the local authority's Director of Children's Services, or the responsible directors in other agencies. Over the past 12 months, the team has been able to make a positive impact in 91% of 343 cases where a representation was made. The team is proud of the outcomes achieved for children, but their involvement means they have already been failed to some extent, which is why it is also so important to use children's experiences to push for systemic improvements to policy and practice.

Last year's annual report identified six key themes in Help at Hand's work: disabled children not receiving the right support within their families, looked after children with special needs not being in education or receiving educational provision, children caught in the gap between health and social care, a lack of suitable residential care provision for children with complex needs, instability and frequent moves for looked after children, and care leavers missing out on support³.

³ Children's Commissioner for England, *Help at Hand Annual Report and Review, 2022*, Available at: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/help-at-hand-annual-report-and-review/>

Some of the key themes to emerge this year were similar:

- 16 and 17 year old children with nowhere to live.
- Unaccompanied children seeking asylum struggling to get the support they need.
- Children with special educational needs missing out on school.
- Lack of suitable residential care provision for children with complex needs.
- Care leavers struggling with inadequate housing and support.

This report explores these themes in more detail, with real case examples of children and young people. It also explains how their experiences and views have informed the office's policy and research work.

2022 Help at Hand review

In 2022, Help at Hand conducted a review into how the team could provide the best possible service to children and young people, which was published alongside the annual report. This led to five aims:

1. Reach more children directly by raising the team's profile with children in care and focusing on key points in their lives (for example, coming into care or leaving care).
2. Provide an integrated digital offer, with a range of digital products aimed at informing and empowering children.
3. Have more of the most serious and complex cases referred to the team by partners.
4. Educate and empower professionals to support systemic improvements.
5. Improve the quality and culture of advocacy nationally.

The end of this report will outline how far these aims have been met, and what the team still needs to do.

Ongoing evaluation

The Children's Commissioner's office's research team carried out an evaluation of the Help at Hand service between August and October 2023. The purpose of this exercise was to help get a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the service.

The evaluation involved 8 interviews, 2 with children and young people the team had worked with over the previous year, 1 parent, and 5 professionals. The interviews were to understand how service users found out about the service, what they thought about the way they were communicated with, whether the service had met their expectations, what the outcomes for them were, and about any recommendations they had. The methodology and a summary of findings are in the annex to this report.

Help at Hand's work in figures, September 2022 to August 2023

This section of the report presents key figures on the work of Help at Hand from 1 September 2022 to 31 August 2023, during which period the team received 998 enquiries.

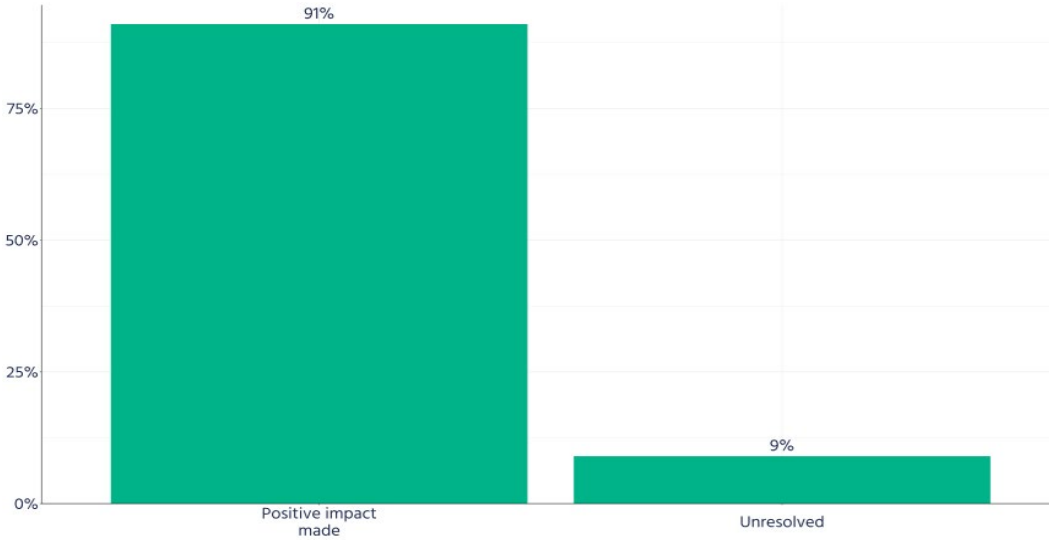
Where the child or young person's age was known, the data shows that almost a quarter (24%) were aged 15 to 17, and just over 11% were young adults between 18 and 26, the majority of whom were care leavers. With regards to gender (excluding those where this was not specified), boys accounted for slightly more than half of enquiries (53% compared to 45% girls).

When asked in interviews how they found out about the team, service users mentioned a number of different routes: a professional working with them (for example their Leaving Care Personal Adviser), a school governor, a friend, their own research, newsletters, and longstanding relationships.

For 383 enquiries, Help at Hand made a representation to the local authority or another service on behalf of the child or young person. Enquiries which did not lead to a representation may have involved the team sharing advice or information, signposting to a different service, or explaining that the issue or individual involved did not fall within the team's remit.

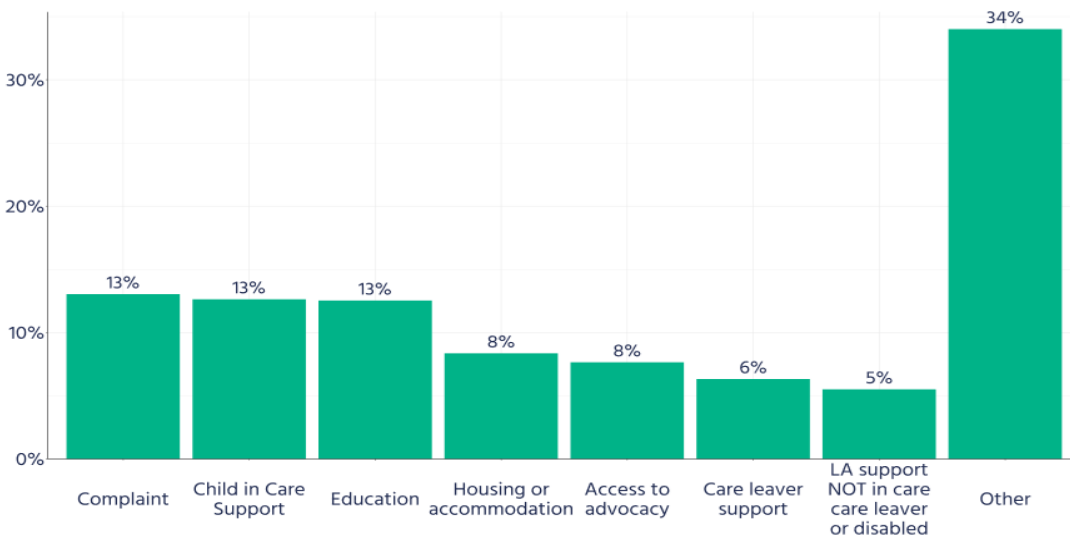
The team made positive impact in the vast majority (91%) of cases where they made direct representations (see figure below). Of this 91% where Help at Hand achieved some level of positive impact, 56% of enquiries were fully resolved and 36% of enquiries were partially resolved. An example of an enquiry where Help at Hand was unable to make an impact might be a child who did not want to be moved, and the team were unable to stop the move because their children's home had served notice. A case where Help at Hand had a positive impact but where the issue was not totally resolved could be connecting a young person with an advocate to take their issue forward.

Figure 1. Outcomes of Help at Hand enquiries where a representation was made



The most common issues that children and professionals contact Help at Hand about are complaints, support for children in care, and education (all 13%). Given the large variety of issues people can raise with Help at Hand, many of the smaller categories have been grouped into ‘other’, which accounts for 34% of enquiries. This category includes placement moves, support for children with disabilities, homelessness, mental health support and access to advocacy, among others.

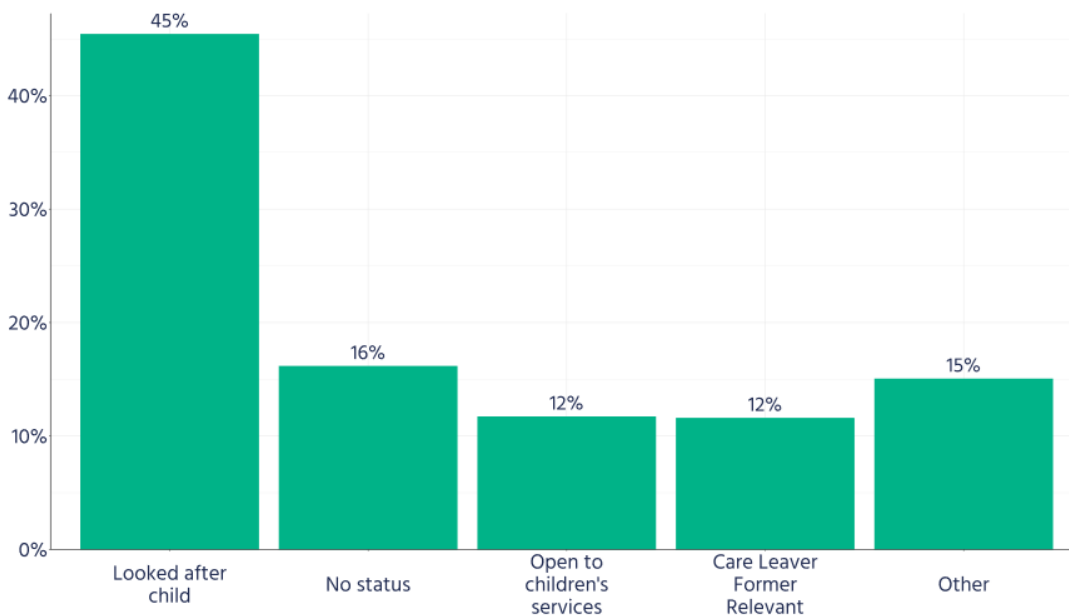
Figure 2. Percentage of Help at Hand enquiries by presenting issue



In this chart, ‘LA support’ means support from the local authority through a child in need plan (Children Act 1989, s17) or child protection plan (s47).

Almost half (45%) of enquiries were raised either by or on behalf of a looked after child (see figure below), which frequently related to care and support, education, and placement moves. This is followed by children with no status (16%) – often unaccompanied children seeking asylum – and care leavers with ‘former relevant’ status (12%).⁴ Another 12% were children who are open to children’s services.

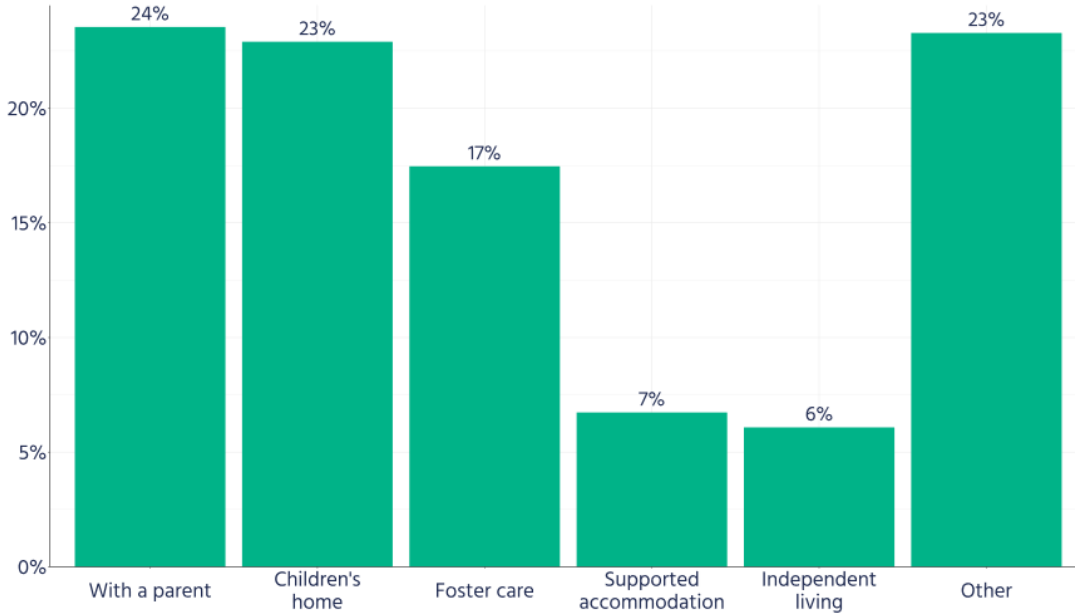
Figure 3. Percentage of Help at Hand enquiries by legal status of child



Almost half of enquiries related to children who were living either with a parent (24%) or in a children’s home (23%). This was followed by almost a fifth (17%) who were living in foster care. A smaller but still notable proportion of young people lived in supported accommodation (7%) or were living independently (6%). The ‘other’ category included small numbers of children who were homeless, living in custody, hospital, or kinship care.

⁴ A former relevant child is a young person aged 18-25 who was in care for more than 13 weeks after the age of 14 and was still in care on their 16th birthday. More details at: <https://childlawadvice.org.uk/information-pages/services-for-children-leaving-care/>

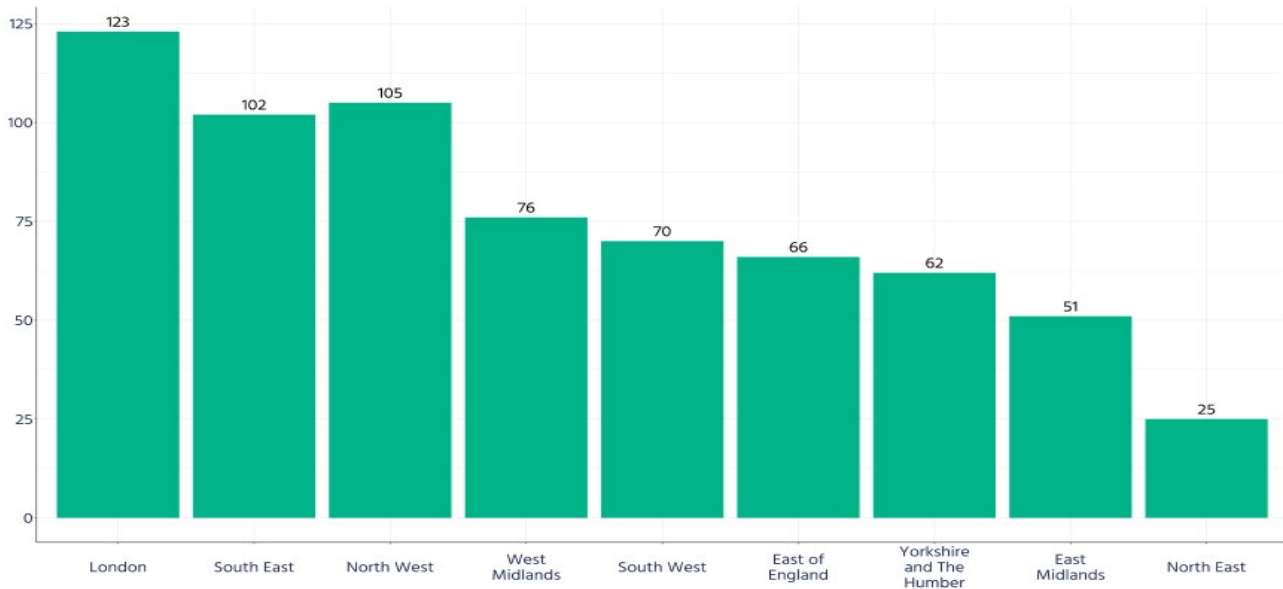
Figure 4. Percentage of Help at Hand enquiries by young person's living arrangement



Regional analysis

Of the 998 enquiries that Help at Hand received, almost a fifth (18%) were from London. This is followed by the South East and North West, both with 15% of all cases. The regions least in contact with Help at Hand were the North East (4%) and East Midlands (8%).

Figure 5. Number of Help at Hand enquiries by region.



The most common presenting issues raised differed somewhat from region to region. In London, the top issue related to housing or accommodation (20% of London cases). In the South East and South West, the most common issue was child in care support (19% and 17% respectively).

Table 1. Top presenting issue by region.

Region	Top issue	% of enquiries in the region
London	Housing or accommodation	22%
South East	Child in Care Support	19%
South West	Child in Care Support	17%
East of England	Complaint	17%
Yorkshire and The Humber	Education	16%
North East	Complaint	16%
North West	Child in Care Support	16%
West Midlands	Child in Care Support	16%
East Midlands	Complaint	14%
Total (England)	Complaint	13%

There was less variation in the legal status of children from region to region. The top legal status in most regions was children with a care order. Only the North East and London were different, where the top legal status was for care leavers.

Living arrangement by region was more varied and split largely between those living in a children’s home (higher in the East Midlands, Yorkshire and The Humber, West Midlands and South West) and those living with a parent (represented more in the East of England, London and North East).

Key themes from our work with children and young people this year

*All names have been changed to protect children's anonymity.

'Victoria is feeling very stressed and worried about not knowing what is going to happen [...] her current situation is impacting on her education and mental and physical health' - Advocate describing a 16 year old homeless child.

Homeless children aged 16 and 17

Help at Hand regularly receives calls from 16 and 17 year olds who are homeless and have been denied assistance by children's services departments. Often these children have been told they can return to a family member or friend. This should always be the first option if possible, but is not safe or suitable for some children, for example if their parents are abusive or their relationship has completely broken down. In some cases, children do not receive a full assessment from children's services before being refused accommodation, or they are told to approach the housing department for a hostel place under homelessness legislation. This is not appropriate for the vast majority of children, and there is statutory guidance in place to ensure that local authorities prioritise their duties to children under the Children Act 1989 (Section 20) over their duties under housing legislation. However, Help at Hand has found that local authorities can be reluctant to formally accommodate children due to the cost implications and long term responsibilities it entails. In a number of cases, the team have had to refer children for legal assistance to have their rights upheld.

Dylan: Forced to return to an abusive family member

Dylan is 17 and contacted Help at Hand because he was scared that he would be forced to return to his brother, who was emotionally and financially abusive. He had been placed with his brother by children's services after being evicted from his parental home. Initially, when he fled his brother's care, the local authority had placed him in a hostel, but said this would only be for a few days and he would have to go back. Help at Hand made representations on his behalf and also ensured he had the support of an independent advocate. After this, a full needs assessment was completed by children's services. They subsequently accepted that he should not return to his brother and offered him accommodation.

John: Local authority refusing to accept accommodation duty

John approached Help at Hand to say he was at risk of street homelessness that evening. He had just turned 17, had a very difficult home situation and had been staying with his grandparents, but this could not continue because they were in a small flat, so they had reluctantly asked him to leave. Children's services completed an assessment but decided he could return to his mother. John felt the impact on his mental health would be unbearable; his mother also refused to have him home. John had an advocate to support him and she shared further information with the team, which strongly suggested it would not be in John's best interests to go home. The advocate and Help at Hand worked together to raise concerns with the local authority about why John had not been accommodated under Section 20. The local authority subsequently changed its position and agreed to offer accommodation. John said it was a huge relief to finally feel safe and secure.

Kayleigh: Delays in arranging accommodation

Kayleigh was 16 when she was removed from her parents by the local authority due to physical and emotional abuse. Her younger siblings were placed in care but Kayleigh agreed to move into Section 20 supported accommodation. The local authority asked her grandmother to look after her while they found a suitable placement. However, after almost a year, she had still not been offered accommodation. She had visited two supported accommodation providers but the local authority then withdrew the offer for funding reasons. Her grandmother was already caring for two older siblings and was not receiving any funding for Kayleigh, so she said she could not keep her any longer. Kayleigh was faced with having nowhere to live and her local authority continued to refuse to accommodate her, so her advocate contacted Help at Hand for assistance. The team contacted the service manager for children and families to ask why Section 20 accommodation had still not been provided, despite the earlier agreement, and asked for this to happen as soon as possible. The local authority responded swiftly, approved a supported accommodation placement for Kayleigh, and confirmed in writing that she was now a looked after child.

Policy work

Given the large number of Help at Hand cases involving 16 and 17 year old homeless children over recent years, the Children's Commissioner used her data collection powers under section 2F of the Children Act to better understand the national picture. The upcoming report looks at how every 16 and 17 year old presenting as homeless to their local authority over the last year was assessed and offered care and support, or not. The report makes recommendations for change, in particular suggesting that there should be more stringent safeguards for ensuring that all 16 and 17 year olds who present as homeless become looked after by default, unless it can be evidenced that their refusal to consent to such care is informed and genuine. The report also recommends ways to ensure that all children have an advocate to guide them through this process and make sure they are fully aware of their rights, and that any accommodation offered to these children (whether under Section 20 or through homelessness legislation and Section 17 of the Children Act) should be regulated by Ofsted. Help at Hand case examples were used as qualitative evidence for the report and helped to shape these recommendations.

Unaccompanied children seeking asylum and needing support

'I have been here for two and half months and maybe I am not lucky – other boys have left after a week and I don't understand why not me' -

Unaccompanied child in a reception centre, 2023.

Help at Hand is there to support all children in England who are looked after, living away from home, or involved with children's services, and this includes unaccompanied children seeking asylum who are living in hotels, reception centres or placed in foster homes or residential care. These young people face many challenges, ranging from delays in moving into care from Home Office accommodation, to problems while in care, and as care leavers.

Solomon: Concerns about local support following age reassessment

Solomon contacted Help at Hand via his charity support worker after she had spent a significant amount of time trying to help him change his date of birth on his asylum Application Registration Card, following a downward reassessment of his age by his local authority (which had originally deemed him an adult). Children's services, while accepting him as a looked after child, did not help him to get legal advice on challenging the initial assessment or respond to his request to lodge a formal complaint, and he was not offered an independent advocate to assist him. He was also anxious about turning 18, as he had not been told about the support he would receive as a care leaver. He had changed social workers several times and felt he could only trust his support worker at the charity. After Help at Hand's involvement, Solomon was finally offered an advocate to assist him with a formal complaint and to attend meetings with professionals. This meant he could be fully supported to express his views and ensure he received a proper transition to leaving care services.

Jafar: Lack of support and advocacy

Jafar's immigration solicitor contacted Help at Hand to raise concerns about the lack of support he was receiving from his social worker, who had age assessed him as a year older than his real age when he originally arrived in the area. He was later reassessed as 16, but he had lost trust in professionals and he told Help at Hand that he felt his social worker belittled and disbelieved him. After being accommodated for nine months, he had not been offered practical help to engage in his college coursework; he had requested a laptop but had been refused and had no access to Wi-Fi where he was living. Help at Hand referred him to a charity for refugees, who provided an advocate to gather his views through an interpreter (which was rarely happening), support him in following up his concerns, and attend meetings with him to ensure he was able to express his wishes and feelings clearly and be heard by the professionals responsible for his care.

National Transfer Scheme delays

In the last 12 months, Help at Hand has carried out several visits to reception centres, where 16 and 17 year old boys are accommodated while waiting to be transferred to a permanent home through the National Transfer Scheme (NTS). Following these visits, Help at Hand has been contacted by many unaccompanied children who have been waiting for more than two months for their transfer to local authority care via the NTS. In these cases, the team contacts the young person's social worker and the NTS team to find out the reasons for the delay and how these can be addressed. This often includes following up with local authorities and the regional Strategic Migration Partnerships responsible for arranging the placements, in order to highlight concerns and ask for arrangements to be expedited. These boys are usually very confused, frustrated and depressed about not being able to move on with their lives after the trauma of leaving their country, and they express how important it is for them to have access to education and a place to call home.

Policy work

The Children's Commissioner worked hard to improve the safeguards for unaccompanied children in the Illegal Migration Bill, briefing MPs and peers as it passed through the house. Few concessions were made, although there were increased protections for pregnant women and unaccompanied children in detention. The Children's Commissioner raised particular concern about the Home Office powers to accommodate children; these have not yet come into force and the Commissioner will continue to advocate for all children to be taken into care of the local authority when they arrive.⁵ Help at Hand has continued to carry out visits to Home Office hotels and reception centres to ensure children know about the service and to carry out individual casework for those who make contact through visits, and by phone or email. The Children's Commissioner's office also uses individual examples to raise concerns about NTS delays with local authority senior managers, the Department for Education, and the Home Office.

Children with Special Educational Needs out of school

'Just getting that young person into provision after 5 months [...] just that immediate impact was really really positive [...] I feel that for every day that a young person is not in an education provision, the more difficult it is to get them into one. So I think it is a short term and a long term positive' – Evaluation interview, professional.

An ongoing issue in Help at Hand's work over the past several years has been children with Special Educational Needs who are out of school. Very often, these are looked after children who have been placed by their local authority outside their home area. This means responsibility for their Education, Health, and Care Plan (EHCP) and school admission is transferred to the local authority where they are

⁵ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/blog/update-on-the-illegal-migration-act/>

living. Unfortunately, this often leads to delays in transferring EHCP paperwork, poor communication between local authorities about funding and support, and unacceptably long delays for children waiting for a new school place.

Florence: Disagreement between local authorities about school funding

Florence is 5 years old and a looked after child. Her Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) contacted Help at Hand after having tried for five months to work with the local SEND team to find a specialist school for Florence in their area. Florence suffered significant trauma prior to coming into care and has additional learning needs as a result. She had been attending a special school but was moved out of the area because her children's home decided they could no longer manage her needs. Due to disagreement between the two local authorities about responsibility for funding Florence's educational placement, she was not able to start school at the beginning of term and was only offered online tutoring, which proved very difficult for her. Florence did not have a specialist advocate to challenge the local authority on her behalf, and there was significant drift and delay in resolving the issue. Help at Hand wrote to the SEND and social care teams but was unable to make progress for Florence, so the Children's Commissioner wrote directly to the Directors of Children's Services for both areas. They reassured her that they would work together to secure an appropriate school place for Florence as soon as possible, and she was allocated a specialist advocate for children with disabilities to support her going forwards.

Adam: Looked after child with disabilities out of school for 2 years

Adam is 16 and came into care as a young child after experiencing abuse at home. He has severe autism and challenging behaviour, and he is non-verbal. He moved to his children's home following safeguarding issues in his Residential Special School and was subsequently out of school for almost two years. He did not have access to specialist non-instructed advocacy because there were no suitably trained advocates in the area. Help at Hand made representations, which were subsequently escalated by the Children's Commissioner to the Director of Children's Services. Adam was finally offered a place at a local independent special school, starting after the summer holidays. The local authority put in place a transition plan and also agreed to address the gap in non-instructed advocacy.

Jacob: Looked after child out of school for a year after being moved

Jacob is a looked after child who moved to a children's home out of his local area in late 2022, when he was 15. Jacob has special education needs and an EHCP. When he moved, his EHCP was transferred to the new area's SEND Team but they were unable to secure a suitable school place for him for the whole of the 2022/23 academic year. This was despite Jacob having done well in his previous school and being very keen to return to education. The SEND team arranged tutoring for Jacob at home but, at 10 hours per week, this was not sufficient to meet his educational needs or provide the social and emotional benefits of being at school with his peer group. The plan was for arrangements to be made for a suitable post-16 placement for Jacob from September, which he was very much looking forward to. Unfortunately, the two colleges which were proposed for Jacob ultimately declined to offer him a place on the grounds that they could not meet his needs. This was particularly disappointing for him, as he had visited them and was excited about joining. He was left again without a placement for the next academic year and there was poor communication from the SEND team to Jacob's Virtual School about the next steps. The Children's Commissioner wrote to the Director of Children's Services in his local area to raise concerns about the impact on Jacob of being denied his right to a full education for so long. Following this, the SEND team set out a clear plan of action and consulted several move specialist colleges, in order to secure Jacob a place.

Policy work

The Children's Commissioner has been an expert adviser on the Department for Education's SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan, which aims to ensure that all children with SEND have the right education, in the right place, at the right time, and that no children are left behind.⁶ In addition, the office completed research this year into the numbers of looked after children who are missing from education, finding that looked after children with special educational needs and disabilities, particularly those with unstable placements or living out of their home area, are more likely to be out of school. The report made a number of recommendations to government for supporting the most vulnerable children

⁶ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/media-centre/statement-from-the-childrens-commissioner-in-response-to-the-send-improvement-plan/>

to attend high quality schools.⁷ The Commissioner has also recently published work to inform the Cabinet Office's Disability Action Plan, using quantitative and qualitative research with disabled children to set out their vision for change. This includes a series of recommendations on providing educational support, leisure opportunities and care for children, as well as specialist advocacy, and uses a number of Help at Hand case examples as evidence for the improvements that are needed.⁸

Children with complex needs in unsuitable settings

'One day no-one spoke to me until 8pm when they asked me about my meds and then it changed to night staff 10 minutes later' - Child under a deprivation of liberty order in an unregistered setting, 2022.

Help at Hand has supported a number of children with complex needs and trauma who are living in highly unsuitable settings, often deprived of their liberty. This includes children in hospital under the Mental Health Act 1983, those in general hospital wards unable to be discharged, and children living in unregistered community settings with substantial controls on their freedom. These are some of the most vulnerable children in the country and the Help at Hand team intervenes to ensure that their rights are not being breached, that they have access to advocacy, and that services are working together proactively to find a more appropriate place for them to live. Often the Children's Commissioner will write to the most senior directors in these cases, but even with this level of involvement there may be no straightforward solution, due to the shortage of specialist therapeutic placements nationwide and limited joined up working between local authority and NHS services.

⁷ Children's Commissioner for England, 2023, *Looked after children who are not in school*, Available at: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/looked-after-children-who-are-not-in-school/>

⁸ Children's Commissioner for England, 2023, *'We all have a voice': Disabled children's vision for change*, Available at: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/we-all-have-a-voice-disabled-childrens-vision-for-change/>

Tommy: Child detained in mental health ward with nowhere to go

Tommy, who is 11, autistic and has a history of trauma, had been detained in a Paediatric Intensive Care Unit for a number of months when his mother contacted Help at Hand. Tommy had been subjected to physical and chemical restraint and was being held in isolation for extended periods, as a means of managing his behaviour. Tommy was highly distressed in hospital, particularly when kept in seclusion, and repeatedly expressed his wish to move to a less restrictive setting, close to his family. Tommy's clinical and social care team agreed on the need for him to move on as soon as possible. However, they had not identified a suitable community placement and there was disagreement between NHS and local authority professionals on whether an alternative secure hospital setting could provide an interim option. The Children's Commissioner wrote to directors in the local authority, NHS England and the Integrated Care Board asking for a clear plan to move Tommy to a more appropriate setting as soon as possible, and Help at Hand attended a number of multi-agency meetings where solutions were discussed. It was agreed that the local authority would need to create a bespoke placement, and the Commissioner followed up with the responsible managers to ensure there would be no further delay in putting this in place.

Zara: Child with learning disabilities stranded in hospital

Zara's lawyer contacted Help at Hand in early 2023. She is 15 and has learning disabilities. Her mother had asked children's services for help to care for her several times but had been refused. Zara's behaviour continued to escalate, ultimately leading to a hospital admission. Zara's consultant was very clear that she should not be in hospital – it was not the right setting for her. She needed a placement in the community if her mother could not cope. The local authority said there was no registered placement that would take her. Zara was being chemically restrained to keep her in hospital as there was no community setting to discharge her to. Help at Hand used their convening power to get the professionals together and focus minds on a child-centred solution. Fortunately, a new children's home, with staff who were familiar with Zara, was set up and she was able to move there.

Paul: Looked after child in adult hospital facility for over a year

Paul is 15 and has profound physical and learning disabilities. He is a looked after child and his independent advocate contacted Help at Hand after she had been trying for a year to have his local authority commit to finding a registered children's home for him, so that he could move out of the adult hospital facility where he was being cared for with 4:1 support. Paul had already suffered physical abuse in the previous two placements and was also found to have been excessively restrained in his current setting. The professionals involved with Paul had all raised concerns that he was becoming institutionalised and completely isolated from his peers. He had been out of school since 2019 and the alternative educational support offered was not appropriate. His advocate had been consistently asking senior children's services managers to ensure a deprivation of liberty authorisation was put in place so that a judge would have an overview of Paul's care plan, but had received no response. The Commissioner wrote to the Director of Children's Services to raise her concerns and received reassurances that a deprivation of liberty application had been made, as well as details of the local authority's plans to create a bespoke placement for Paul, with a care package to support him into adulthood.

Policy work

Help at Hand case examples have informed the office's work on children with disabilities and children in care, including ongoing calls for the right specialist placements for children with the highest needs. The Children's Commissioner has continued to push for this through her role in advising government on the implementation of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care. The office has also been commissioned to work on a cross-government project on improving the experiences of children with complex trauma who are deprived of their liberty. Children who have been supported by Help at Hand, and their parents and professionals, will be interviewed as part of this work, and the aim is to ensure that their voices are used to inform the recommendations for change.

Care leavers struggling to access support

'Honestly I appreciate everything you've done for me. It's really made an impact on my life. Fingers crossed everything goes well. I'll definitely keep you posted' - Care leaver (accommodation issue), 2023.

Help at Hand continues to support care leavers with the range of issues they encounter up to and beyond 18, when they are still entitled to local authority support but often do not get what they need. Housing is a particular challenge, with many care leavers finding the right kind of accommodation and support is not available to them, sometimes leading to homelessness, financial difficulties, and challenges with their mental health. This can be the result of poor planning for transition by the local authority but also reflects the challenges nationally with access to suitable housing and adult services.

Yuri: Local authority refusing to provide safe housing

Yuri was a 23 year-old care leaver when he and his advocate contacted Help at Hand about the lack of support he was receiving from his Personal Adviser (leaving care worker) to support him with his application for social housing in his local area. Yuri had been placed out of the area when he was in care, and as he turned 18 this presented as a problem as he was not automatically entitled to have priority for housing due to not meeting the residency requirement. He had also been a victim of a knife attack and had asked to be moved, as the attacker knew where he lived, putting him at risk. His victim support officer and Community Mental Health Team worker wrote to the local authority to explain the impact of where he was living on his mental health and the risk it presented to him. Despite his advocate helping with him with a formal complaint, the local authority insisted Yuri did not meet the criteria to be presented to the housing panel. Yuri asked Help at Hand to assist him with challenging this, but the local authority remained resistant. The team then advised Yuri to contact his MP to intervene on his behalf and also referred him to a solicitor who represented him in challenging the local authority and finally managed to secure new offer of housing for him.

Polly: Inappropriate accommodation offered

Polly is a looked after child with mild learning difficulties, who was living in a children's home and approaching her eighteen birthday when her advocate contacted Help at Hand. The local authority was planning to move her to semi-independent accommodation, which Polly did not feel ready for. Help at Hand wrote to her local authority asking for the move to be paused and reconsidered, given Polly's learning difficulties and the fact that her children's home was happy for her to remain while other options were explored. The local authority agreed to reassess Polly's needs and to involve her and her advocate in decisions going forward. Polly had an assessment with the adult social care team, which confirmed that she met their criteria for ongoing support into adulthood, so agreement was made for her to move on to supported housing when she turned eighteen. Polly was happy with this decision, which meant she would have a higher level of support but could still develop her independence.

Nora: Leaving Care Team not assisting with accommodation for university

Nora, a 22 year old care leaver, approached Help at Hand as she was at risk of homelessness and was not able to claim social housing in her local area, as her parent local authority had placed her out of the region when she was a child. She was attending university but was not able to cover all of her living expenses while studying full-time. She had experienced two changes of Personal Adviser and had not received any information from her current PA or the Leaving Care duty team for several months. Her university's care leaver support service was very helpful and they had also tried to approach her Leaving Care Team but had received no response. After several months of representations from Help at Hand, including attending meetings with Nora and professionals, the Leaving Care Team assisted her in securing a private tenancy in the area where she was settled. She was also finally given her higher education bursary payments, which had been stopped for over 10 months. In addition, Nora received assurances in writing that she would be given extra financial support if needed to maintain her flat, until she completed university and secured a full time job.

Policy work

The Children's Commissioner and her team regularly work with ministers and stakeholders to advocate for care leavers, including at the Care Leavers' Ministerial Board. The Commissioner has also established a Care Experienced Advisory Board of young people to consult on the office's policies and priorities and to work on individual projects, including a guide for higher and further education providers on what care experienced students need to support them. The Children's Commissioner's office's platform for care experienced young people, IMO, offers advice and information for care leavers, particularly on important transitions, and the office recently produced a practical guide for care leavers planning on going to university.⁹

⁹ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/blog-care-leavers-week/>

Follow-up to 2022 Help at Hand review

Aims and outcomes from the 2022 review

1. Reach more children directly by raising the team's profile with children in care and focusing on key points in their lives (for example, coming into care or leaving care).

Inquiries to Help at Hand have increased: in the year to 31st August 2023, Help at Hand received 998 inquiries. In the preceding 12 months, this was 725 – a substantial increase. This is the result of proactive work from Help at Hand and the office to reach more children. The team wrote to every children's home in the country to share details about the service and provided flyers to share with children, including easy-read versions. The team has also continued to visit children in different settings and to attend children in care councils around the country. The Children's Commissioner has championed Help at Hand through her visits to schools, hospitals, and other settings, and this has resulted in more referrals to the service. The use of Help at Hand case examples in published reports has also highlighted the work of the team and increased referrals on specific issues. The team plans to continue expanding its reach where possible, particularly to those children who may have more difficulties making contact, such as children with disabilities. However, this will be dependent on resources, as it is important to maintain the quality and responsiveness of the service.

2. Provide an integrated digital offer, with a range of digital products aimed at informing and empowering children

Help at Hand has worked on developing the team's website to include more information for children in accessible formats. This includes improved easy-read leaflets and a British Sign Language video. The team has also recently completed a rebrand to make the website more engaging for children and integrate it more closely with the Children's Commissioner's platform for care-experienced young people, IMO, and with the Children's Commissioner's Office main website.

3. Have more of the most serious and complex cases referred to Help at Hand from partners

Prompted by the Children's Commissioner's direct engagement with stakeholders, such as local authority directors, hospital managers and virtual school heads, and references to Help at Hand cases in reports, more agencies are referring cases to Help and Hand, and the team is working as an effective escalation point for advocacy services and professionals. The team also continues to share information with Ofsted, the Department for Education, and the Care Quality Commission, and to raise serious cases with relevant directors through the Children's Commissioner's personal intervention. The team will continue to work on reaching children and young people in the most difficult situations, both directly and through professionals.

4. Educate and empower professionals to support systemic improvements

The team has carried out a number of free training sessions for professionals, including children's home staff and advocates, on key issues affecting children and young people, such as placement moves and the entitlements of care leavers. They have also engaged with Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs) in schools around the needs of particular groups of vulnerable children, including unaccompanied children seeking asylum. The team is now working more closely with the Department for Education's Regional Improvement Support Leads to share cases and issues of concern, and continues to work with Ofsted in this way. In the coming year, there will be a focus on working more closely with safeguarding partnerships, local authority scrutiny committees and further work on building relationships with schools and children's homes, with a focus on reaching disabled children.

5. Improve the quality and culture of advocacy nationally

Help at Hand works closely with many effective advocacy services, but where there are concerns about the advocacy offer for children, this is raised with directors of children's services or chief executive officers within the local authority. In addition to providing guidance to advocates on a case-by-case basis, Help at Hand has provided training for advocacy services within individual authorities and held online training sessions open to all advocates, on key issues affecting children in care and care leavers.

'So helpful, thank you so much, I look forward to future sessions' - Feedback from attendee following training session for advocates provided by Help at Hand in 2023.

The team has also been involved in the office's forthcoming audit of advocacy services - examining their availability, quality, and independence. The audit involved interviews with children and advocacy professionals to make recommendations about how advocacy could be improved at a local and national level. Help at Hand provided real examples of strengths and weaknesses of advocacy in different areas, based on the experiences of children and young people.

Look Ahead

The number of children and young people receiving assistance from Help at Hand has increased over the past 12 months and the team will continue to support as many children as possible, particularly the most vulnerable children who are looked after, disabled, or living away from home for other reasons, including unaccompanied children seeking asylum.

Help at Hand is a small team; to achieve the most impact it needs to support advocates and professionals working directly with children, who can take on many issues and refer to Help at Hand when matters are urgent or it has not been possible to find a resolution. The Department for Education's upcoming Advocacy Standards will ensure that advocacy is available to all children with a social worker and this is to be welcomed. The team will continue to provide advice on children's rights to advocates and a range of professionals, run training sessions on important topics, and raise awareness of the service as a point of escalation where needed.

The team will also keep on working to implement the aims of the 2022 Help at Hand review and consider the feedback from the 2023 evaluation, particularly where there is more to be done. A key aim is to continue reaching more children with disabilities, through adding additional easy-read and accessible materials to the website, working closely with Coram Voice's specialist advocacy service for children with disabilities, and carrying out further visits to children's homes and residential special schools.

Finally, the team will continue the important collaboration with colleagues to ensure that the office's priorities, policies, and research reflect the experiences of children who are supported by Help at Hand, particularly those who are being failed by services. This will ensure that the Children's Commissioner is able to advocate for these children in the strongest possible way.

Annex

Methodology of Evaluation

The participants were randomly selected to be approached and asked to take part in an interview based on falling into the following categories: care leaver, child in care, child in need, child living in a secure setting, and any other children. The evaluation also aimed to speak to service users who were either an unaccompanied child seeking asylum, or in a hospital, but it was not possible to interview any children in these groups. The achieved sample is likely to have been biased towards those with particularly positive or negative experiences of using the Help at Hand service.

Feedback from interviews with service users

Overall, service users reported a positive experience of the service and the impact that team was able to make. 6 out of the 8 interviewees had an overall positive experience with the service.

'It's really reassuring to know that the service is available. And I do share it in our network with other DSLs [Designated Safeguarding Leads] and the school. So, I think for us we often don't know where to go with cases, and so it does definitely provide another layer, or another piece of like something else in our arsenal to use when we've got those tricky cases. And I would just like all DSLs to know about it'- Professional, Child In Need, interview 2.

However, there was also some feedback from a parent and also young person who felt the team had not been able to help with their issue.

'If you're under 16 then maybe [I would recommend Help at Hand], I was 17, and I was literally begging everyone and anyone for help, you need to be in the care system, blablabla, but clearly, I was asking for help and no one

helped me at all. [...] If anything the social worker made the situation worse' - Young person, 19, interview 8.

Communication

Most service users who were interviewed valued how they were communicated with. They felt they were listened to and received a rapid response. They felt their concerns were acted on and they were kept up to date on the progress of their case. They also valued that Help at Hand staff followed up with them.

Recommendations

Interviewees provided helpful feedback about how the team could be even more accessible by modifying materials and visiting more children where they live. Professionals and young people also mentioned that Help at Hand could be more visible on social media. They explained that, unless you are part of the system, you wouldn't necessarily come across the service.

Service users spoke about the need for more advertisement of the service. In particular the service users who had positive experiences felt that Help at Hand should be known about more widely. While this feedback is much appreciated by the Help at Hand team, it also raises questions about how increasing the number of enquiries could affect the team's capacity to respond quickly, which is an element of the service that is highly valued by those who use it.

'I think a lot of schools wouldn't know to use the service. I think it needs to be published more widely. I don't know if local authorities would publicise it but they often do have a directory of where to go for support so it would be good if it was on there, things like that' - Professional, Child In Need, interview 2.

The office has just completed a rebrand of Help at Hand, which will hopefully contribute to improving its visibility, and the team will continue to carry out visits to share information with as many children as possible, particularly those who may have trouble reaching them. They will also continue to look

into ways of collecting more comprehensive feedback from children and young people, as this is always valuable for understanding how to offer the best possible service to them.

Summary of support received

'I would say that they supported me a lot in the sense that, especially the first time, the 2018, 2019 time, with [the council], the Children's Commissioner made sure that that was put in place. This time around [the council] neglected me again and I was homeless and it got to a point where I have to get the Children's Commissioner involved, I was homeless for several months, but when [Help at Hand staff] was involved by then, they had already been resolved' – Young person, 23, care leaver, interview 1.

'I think well, they've obviously supported me, but more so they've supported the family and ensured me. So what my problem was, it felt like other professionals weren't supporting the children's housing and they are potentially at risk because of this. And they were able to have the power to speak to the people involved to ensure that the children were safe and what the plan was. So it just provided some assurance' – Professional, Child In Need, interview 2.

'First of all, by listening and understanding the concerns that we were raising [...] and by updating us on when they've had discussions or had received replies or answers from the local authority, so not just accepting; and that way [...] keeping us up to date with any progress that they might have achieved with the concern' - Professional, secure setting, interview 4.

'I sent the email, stated what the issue was very clearly, I got a phone call from [Help at Hand staff], who asked me lots of questions, she said to me have you thought about this have you thought that [...] I then emailed both local authorities saying I've just had the discussion with the Children's Commissioner's office, they said this here and then a provision was found within 48 hours. So just having that conversation and of course the Teams meeting that was offered as well, getting them involved, and actually, they were happy to get more involved, but because the case was solved quite quickly, yea, very positive' - Professional, children's home, interview 5.

'I was signposted and the place I was signposted I got the correct information, so that was good. The one before that and this has happened a few times. Then I was able to talk through the issue with [Help at Hand staff] and then she gave me information that I could use. I could pass on to the young person and I could use it in the advocacy, but she also was able on quite a number of occasions to contact local authorities for me and say this case has been raised. And that's when moved things on dramatically' – Professional, in care, interview 6.

'I can't thank them enough. They've really supported the kids I've worked with and really taken into consideration the kids' feelings [...] and when they've spoken to the kids in a way that they understand and they feel like they're being listened to [...]. I think they're really behind you. And I just think that honestly [...] I don't know how to put it into words, but basically, you know how well they've supported the kids in the homes, how well they've supported us as a home, how well they support people and that, you know, they don't just give you sort of just answers for answers. So they actually do the research and look into it for you. And they make it their business to do it, you know? And you're always kept updated' - Professional, housing manager, interview 7.

Methodology of Quantitative research

Help at Hand keeps track of and manages enquiries using a log system which collects relevant information such as age, gender, legal status of the young person, setting, reasons for contacting (presenting issues), risk rating, actions taken and outcomes, on a per enquiry basis.

The analysis filters this set of data to the specified date range of 1st September 2022 to 31st August 2023.



Help at Hand is the Children's Commissioner's advice and assistance service for children in care, children who have a social worker or are working with social services, children living away from home and care leavers.

Children, young people, or their advocates can get in touch with Help at Hand for free by phone, website or email.

0800 528 0731 (9am and 5pm, Monday to Friday)

www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/help-at-hand

help.team@childrenscommissioner.gov.uk



Sanctuary Buildings, 20 Great Smith Street, London, SW1P 3BT

020 7783 8330 | www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk

@childrenscommissioner @ChildrensComm @childrenscommissionersoffice