



The voices of children in care and care leavers on what makes life good:

Recommendations
for reviewing the
care system

Focus on what children in care and care leavers say makes life good

To make children and young people's lives better, we need to know them, what they love doing, their hopes and feelings. However, the state, as their parent, often does not fully know what matters to the children and young people it cares for. Official statistics used to monitor the care system provide only a partial picture of children in care and care leavers' lives by focusing on objective measures and adult assessments of how children and young people are doing – e.g. where they live and how they are doing educationally. This does not tell us what being in care is like for children and young people: do they feel happy, safe and think they are doing well?

When developing policy and practice in the care system, the key question should be - will children in care and care leavers feel that their lives got better as a result? Care should prioritise what is important to children and young people themselves.

Over the past five years, we have sought to address this gap by collecting over 13,500 care experienced voices through our Your Life, *Your Care and Your Life Beyond Care* surveys. These 'voices' give an unprecedented insight into children in care and care leavers' subjective well-being. The surveys were developed together with almost 200 children and young people as part of the Bright Spots programme, a partnership between Coram Voice and the University of Oxford. Working with over 50 Local Authorities we have systematically surveyed care experienced children and young people aged 4 to 25 years old, providing unprecedented insights into children in care and care leavers' subjective wellbeing and what they think would make care better. What makes this work unique, in addition to focusing on children's own views, is that by being co-produced with children in care and care leavers, the issues it covers are those that matter most to children and young people (see the Bright Spots indicators below). Our Bright Spots surveys and well-being indicators recognise that children's experiences in and after leaving care differ based on age and stage and we reflect this, with four age appropriate Your Life, Your Care surveys for children in care aged 4-18 and the Your Life Beyond Care survey for 18-25 year olds.

The Scottish Independent Care Review was driven by those with experience of care, aiming to hear 1,000 voices. An English care review should have the same ambition, but it does not need to start from scratch. We already have over 13,500 care-experienced voices and we continue to collect thousands of views every year.

Drawing on the work from the Bright Spots Programme and Coram Voice's wider advocacy and the Always Heard Advocacy Advice Line, this paper sets out Coram Voice's position on the framework that should be used for a review of the English care system and our recommendations.



“Listen to young people views and thoughts. They know what’s going on, you don’t!”

(Care leaver)

There is already a mechanism to explore what makes life good and what could make care better, which can be used to put care experienced voices at the heart of the care review. Use the Bright Spots indicators and what we have learned from the thousands of care experienced voices who have responded to our surveys to establish a care system that not only keeps young people safe, but helps them to flourish, by designing services and providing support focused on what well-being is to them.

New ways of working - wider remit for children's services

Building trust

Across all age groups relationships were identified by children and young people as a key feature of well-being and therefore one of the core issues we explore in our surveys. Trust was what both children in care and care leavers wanted from the relationships with people in the care system – they wanted to be able to trust carers and workers, have people they could trust in their lives and be trusted themselves.

The care system must put trust at its heart. Children and young people should be able to trust the care system to look after them and it should support them, whilst they are in care and into adulthood, to develop trusting relationships with the adults responsible for their care.

Taking a broader view

A care system that pays attention to children and young people's views and seeks to improve how children and young people feel about their lives, needs to put a greater emphasis on well-being and areas that services have not always focused on. This includes, for example, helping young people feel happy with how they look, tackling loneliness amongst care leavers, as well as building trust between children and young people and carers or workers.

The care review should explore how children's social care can work differently, so that carers and professionals actively address the issues children and young people emphasise are important to them and may not have traditionally been the focus of care. This must incorporate reviewing the approach to individual care and pathway plans and individual support, as well as strategic plans, local offers, and service development. National guidance, inspections and policy initiatives must be adapted to reinforce this approach.

"I think everyone should have a person they could talk to without being scared... Kids in care shouldn't be scared of trusting someone. It's a major key for their future."

(11-18 year old in care)

Your Life, Your Care - What makes life good for children in care?

Bright Spots Well-Being Indicators: Children in care



What should the care system focus on for children in care?

Support children and young people to keep and develop their relationships with those that are important to them, so they:

- Get to see their birth parents, brothers and sisters and relatives if they want to.
- Have social workers that they trust who do not change.
- Have carers who they trust.
- Have good friends and pets.

Help children and young people to participate in decisions, understand the system and their rights and be free from abuse and discrimination, so they:

- Feel they have a say in the decisions social workers make about their care.
- Know who their social workers are and can easily get in touch with them.
- Feel able to raise concerns about their care e.g. by speaking to social workers alone.
- Are not singled out or made to feel embarrassed about being in care by the adults around them.
- Feel safe where they live.
- Are not afraid to go to school because of bullying and are supported with any bullying they experience.

Give children and young people a chance to learn how to manage the challenges in life and have the opportunities they need, by making sure they:

- Have an adult who they trust, who helps them and sticks by them no matter what.
- Enjoy school/college and have carers that are interested in their learning.
- Get to have fun at weekends, spend time on their hobbies and explore the outdoors.
- Are supported to practise life skills such as cooking, washing clothes and going to the bank.
- Have internet access where they live.
- Have opportunities to show they can be trusted and second chances when they get things wrong.

Support children and young people to come to terms with what has happened to them and make them feel that they have the same value as other children, by making sure they:

- Feel the reasons why they are in care have been fully explained.
- Feel happy with the way they look.
- Feel settled where they live and like their bedrooms.
- Have carers who notice their feelings and who they can talk to.
- Worry less about their feelings and behaviour and get help when they are worried.
- Get to do similar things to their friends.

Your Life Beyond Care - What makes life good for care leavers?

Bright Spots Well-Being Indicators:



What should the care system focus on for care leavers?

Support young people to keep and develop relationships with those that are important to them, so they:

- Have good friends, supportive partners and pets.
- Have a range of people who give them emotional support.
- Have people in their lives they can trust, who listen to, encourage and believe in them.

Develop services that care leavers can trust to be there for them when they need them and support staff to be caring, available and actively engage care leaver, so they:

- Have consistent leaving care workers/personal advisers whom they trust.
- Know who their workers are and can easily get in touch with them.
- Feel involved in setting goals and defining the support they need through pathway planning.
- Feel that the reasons they were in care have been fully explained.

Support young people to manage the challenges of independent living by providing services that make sure they:

- Feel safe and settled where they live and in their neighbourhood.
- Feel where they live is right for them.
- Have goals and plans for the future and are supported to pursue study, work or training.
- Feel able to cope financially.
- Have access to internet and phones that they can afford.
- Are able to have fun and do activities they enjoy.

Help care leavers feel better about themselves and their lives by providing emotional support, so they:

- Are happy with how they look.
- Do not often feel lonely.
- Do not regularly feel angry or afraid, but instead proud, optimistic and full of energy.
- Are less anxious and stressed and feel positive about the future.

Further information

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Coram Voice is a leading children's rights organisation, championing the rights of children in care, care leavers and others who depend upon the help of the state. We get young voices heard in decisions that matter to them and work to improve their lives.

The Bright Spots programme is a partnership between Coram Voice & the Rees Centre at the University of Oxford, (www.education.ox.ac.uk/rees-central/).
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Rees Centre

