



Coram Voice response to the Independent Review for Children's Social Care, Case for Change

About us

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

Coram Voice works in a variety of different areas in order to support children and young people in care and care leavers.

We deliver high quality advice and support

Our advocates make sure children know their rights and have a right to say what they think when decisions are made about their care, regardless of their age, understanding, status or geography.

We seek out those who need our help most

Those children who need us the most are often the least likely to contact us. We go to places where children in care and care leavers are highly represented, such as centres for homeless young people.

We work as a problem solving partner

We work with governmental bodies, Local Authorities, social care organisations and health services to ensure children's voices are at the heart of service delivery. We also make sure that service development, improvement and delivery in this area, is informed by children's knowledge and experience.

We provide a platform for A National Voice for children and young people

So they themselves can champion a change in attitudes, challenging the stigma they face and promoting their ambitions and achievements.

We achieve this through:

- Providing [Always Heard](#), the only national advocacy advice line and safety net for children in and leaving care.
- Our national network of [independent advocates](#).
- [Independent visitors](#) to become reliable adult support for children.
- Independent persons to ensure children's rights are upheld in the [complaints process](#) and at [Secure Accommodation Reviews](#).
- The [Bright Spots Programme](#), the largest national survey of the views of children and young people in and leaving care in England.
- [Voices](#) our national writing competition for children and young people in and leaving care.
- [A National Voice](#), our ambassador programme for care experienced children and young people.

What should the purpose of children's social care be?

The Review asks the core question of us all, what the purpose of children's social care should be.

We believe that the aim must be to make the lives of care experienced children and young people better, by focusing on the issues that matter most to them.

We should establish a care system that not only keeps young people safe, but helps them to flourish, by designing services and providing support that is focused on what well-being is to them and based on what we would want for our own children. Central to such a system is that children and young people have a say in the decisions that matter to them.

We welcome the focus on building not breaking relationships in the Case for Change. An important role for the care system is to help children maintain and establish relationships with people who can help them whilst in care and provide them with lifelong support.

It is important that we focus on the quality of the relationships that children in care and care leavers have with the people inside and outside the system. From what children and young people have told us, trust needs to be the cornerstone of these relationships. When the Bright Spots programme worked with children in care to establish what is important to their well-being, children in care and care leavers wanted to be able to trust carers and workers, have people they could trust in their lives and be trusted themselves¹. Therefore, 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.

"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)

We agree with the review that the state needs to be a 'pushy parent'. Being in care should benefit, rather than disadvantage young people. The state should give children in care and care leavers the same opportunities and experiences as other young people. When the state steps in to look after a child, it is down to the state as their corporate parent, to step up to support them to reach their full potential. Local authorities should want their children to do (at least) as well as other young people. Yet, when we compare how care leavers feel they are doing to other young adults, the difference is stark. Care leavers experience higher levels of anxiety and loneliness, lower life satisfaction,

*"Please don't forget about us. We are people too and although we may be incredibly marginalised it does not mean we are not worthy or deserving ...Often we require more support and care than the general population because of our experiences, though in reality we get much less. Please fix that."
(Care leaver)*

Children's Rights Perspective

As a children's rights charity we support the call made by many others in the sector, including the Alliance for Children in Care and Care and Care leavers (of which we are an

¹ <https://coramvoice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Our-Lives-Our-Care-2016-FULL-REPORT-2.pdf>

active member) for the review to take a rights based approach. Our response fits within this framework.

Raising the quality of decision making through advocacy

Keeping children safe is paramount and it is important that the system does not fail to act where needed to remove children and young people from families when this is what is best for them. Whilst many children and young people feel very strongly that they want to have more contact with their families², some of the young people we work with report that the drive to keep them with their families meant that they stayed in unsafe and damaging situations for too long. It will be important that the emphasis on family support in the review, which is welcome for those children and young people for whom it is right, should not lead to a failure to act if children and young people are at risk of harm. There should not be an assumption that care is a bad thing for those children who need it. From the Bright Spots programme research we know that a majority of children (82%) in care feel that their lives are getting better.³

Effectively listening to the wishes and feelings of children is an essential part of ensuring that the system can protect and support them, but being enabled to have a voice is complex and requires additional support from skilled professionals and advocates.

From our experiences from our advocacy services we are concerned that not all decisions in child protection are focused on safeguarding children, but sometimes on safeguarding all too scarce resources.

Many years after the G vs Southwark judgment⁴ we come across systematic practice of gatekeeping by local authorities for children who find themselves homeless at 16 or 17. This forms part of the picture where vulnerable teenagers are not always recognised as the children they legally are and adequately safeguarded and provided with care when they are at risk of harm. The legal framework that protects these children from harm is strong, and Coram Voice advocates successfully challenge where they are not given the care and protection that they need, but the application of the law by local authorities is not always robust. We are particularly concerned about the instances where children are denied care, not just based on flawed individual assessments, but where local policies are unlawful and thus systematically fail to accommodate children who should be accommodated under section 20. Not only does this mean children not get the care or support they need but additionally no entitlement to leaving care support at 18 plus. Independent scrutiny of local authority policies and procedures to ensure that they are in line with legal duties to children would be an important safeguard against such practice. The quality of decision making would be improved if policies and procedures consistently apply the legal framework that is there to protect children.

Case Study (15628)

Katie⁵, is an 18 year old young person who had a social worker for several years when she was 14 and had gone back to Children Services aged 16 when things at home got bad again.

² Lewis, S, Selwyn, L & Bright Spots team (forthcoming) Family time: children and young people's views on seeing their family (draft shared with review team)

³ <https://coramvoice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/OLOC-Snapshot-online-2.pdf>

⁴ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200809/ldjudgmt/jd090520/appg-1.htm>

⁵ Name has been changed

Initial Advocacy Issues

Katie told the advocate that aged 17 and homeless she *"went to the council about needing housing. They advised me to go into care or independent housing. They pushed me into independent housing. I was 17 at the time but now I am 18. They didn't make anything clear to me – they said I would change social worker that's it. They told me it wouldn't be much different and just that there would be someone to advise me. Now they are saying to me – because I didn't chose the going into care route they can't provide me with support – but how was I supposed to know that. They didn't explain"*

Katie said that now she had turned 18 she was facing homelessness again and Children's Services said that her case was going to be closed as she was now an adult. Children's Services had previously given her lots of advice and support but her social worker advised that as Katie had been supported under Section 17 and not taken in to care under Section 20 she was not a care leaver.

Entitlement to Advocacy

Young people like Katie all too often fall through the gaps in the system. Despite the fact that she should have been taken into care when she was a child her status as a care leaver was not recognised by Children's Services. This in turn meant that her right to advocacy was not clear, as she needed to be recognised as a care leaver to access advocacy, but need advocacy support to establish that she was a care leaver.

The local advocacy service was unable to assist Katie under their contract with the local authority as Katie was not accepted to be a care leaver. This is why Katie's case was referred to the Always Heard Safety Net.

Katie was given advice by the Helpline Advocate on her rights and the fact that Children's Services should have explained the difference between Section 17 and 20 and actively encouraged her to come into care if they felt that was in her best interests. The fact that Katie had been given much more support than just a roof over her head by her social worker suggested that she should have been taken into care. The advocate advised that Katie could still change things by approaching the local authority to ask them to accept that she had been or should have been in care under Section 20 so should now be supported as a care leaver. Katie was advised that sometimes young people in this situation needed to get legal support to achieve a successful outcome.

Katie asked for a Safety Net advocate to help her approach her local authority and ask them to acknowledge that she was a care leaver. Initially the local authority remained clear that her case was going to be closed. Katie and her advocate then worked together to make a complaint to Children's Services about how she had been treated. The advocate set out all the reasons why Katie should have been in care, and how she had been badly advised about Section 17 and 20.

Katie was delighted when her local authority accepted her complaint at stage 1 and acknowledged that she should have been taken into care. They apologised for the way that Katie had been treated. Katie now has a Personal Advisor and Pathway Plan and will be support as a care leaver up to when she turns 25.

Addressing systemic barriers to advocacy

The barrier to advocacy that was experienced by Katie was that she falls between the gaps in the system. The vast majority of local advocacy services would be unable to assist

her because her care status was not established.

Key Outcomes

The key outcomes that could be identified from the work carried out by the Always Heard Safety Net in this case are:

- Katie was able to access critical advocacy support that she was unable to obtain through her local service.
- Through this advocacy support Katie achieved a life changing outcome of being

Through this advocacy support Katie achieved a life changing outcome of being recognised as a care leaver with all the support that will give her to establish herself as an independent adult

Learning

If Katie had not contacted the Always Heard Helpline for support, it is likely that she would have never have received leaving care support. This case reinforces the importance of providing the Safety Net to children and young people from their perspective, rather than that of Children's Services. Katie believed she should be a care leaver and this was shown to be correct once advocacy support was provided.

Our service has increasingly supported children and young people to access legal support to resolve similar cases as local authorities frequently rebuff informal attempts to secure care or leaving care status. However Katie's case is a reminder that Children Act complaints can provide swift resolution in some cases.

The learning for the local authority was that Katie's experience indicated that homeless children are being failed by their Children's Services. Coram Voice are raising this with the local authority to ensure that this learning is acted on.

Service development

Cases like Katie's highlight the positive outcomes that can be achieved for young people using the Children Act complaints process. This case also provides a clear example of where local authorities need to better support homeless children and put in place advocacy support for young people who say they have been let down.

Placing children and young people's wishes and feelings at the heart of decision making is also an important way of raising the quality of decision making in child protection. This should include offering advocacy to all children in the child protection process. It is important to have independent advice and support to have your voice heard and to help you navigate the system. We know from our child protection advocacy services, that where advocates support children in the child protection process, decisions are more informed by the child's perspective and children also feel more informed and understand what is happening. It gives children the opportunity to voice what they would like to happen and articulate what makes them feel safe and not safe. To build trust, it is important that advocacy is independent, delivered by someone who is not part of the decision making process

Homeless Outreach Case Study: Based on issues presented in case 9470 and others.

A youth worker called the Coram Voice team to ask us to help John. John was a child living in East London.

John was 15 when he first spent the night out on the streets. His home life had been difficult for years with his dad hitting his mum even after she became terminally ill. After his mum died things got even worse at home. John's dad was drinking heavily, was increasingly verbally abusive and regularly violent towards John. Things came to a head when John's dad grabbed him by the neck and threatened to kill him. John fled the family home and went to the police who told him to find somewhere safe to live for the next few days.

Children's Services became involved but John felt pressurised by the social worker to go home. His dad denied what was happening and John felt that the social worker was taking his dad's side. The social worker said they she would investigate John's allegations about his dad but in the meantime John had to go home. John asked for the help of his youth worker and his school but even after their intervention John was still told to go home. The social worker said to John's youth worker that he had to go home as "who will pay for his accommodation while assessment is being done"

John refused to go home as he feared that his dad would attack him again. He managed to spend a few nights on a friend's sofas. This is how John spent his 16th birthday. Unable to return to a violent and abusive home and refused accommodation by Children's Services.

John started to run out of options and one night he slept out on the street overnight as there was nowhere to go. John's youth worker had heard about Coram Voice's Homeless Outreach Project from a colleague who had attended one of our training sessions. She put John in touch with Coram Voice.

Our advocate listened to what John had to say and immediately contacted Children's Services to ask them to provide him with accommodation and to make a formal assessment of his needs. Our advocate was told by the Social Worker that was looking at his case that John needed to go back home. She said that she had spoken with John's dad and he had said that he wanted John to come home. Our advocate set out clearly John's fears of returning home and his past experience of physical and emotional abuse at his father's hands but the social worker refused to change her decision.

It was late in the day and our advocate supported to contact the police who managed to persuade one of John's friend's family to let him stay overnight.

The next day John's advocate made an urgent referral to one of the specialist children's solicitors Coram Voice works with and working together they managed to persuade the local authority to provide John with accommodation whilst they made a proper assessment of his needs. John was found an emergency foster care home. Finally John was safe.

Our advocate continued to support John to ensure that he remained in the care of Children's Services and was by his side as the assessment of his needs was completed and it was confirmed that he would be looked after.

Coram Voice is proud to have supported this remarkable young person. John has survived the loss of his mum, an abusive home, homelessness and an initial rejection by Children's Service. Throughout this time he managed to attend school and study for and sit his GCSE exams.

No child should be homeless. It is concerning that despite the best efforts of John's youth worker and school it was not until Coram Voice's Homeless Outreach project became involved that Children's Services accepted their responsibility to keep him safe.

The review rightly identifies the unequal power dynamics between social workers and children and families. We believe that access to independent advocacy is an important tool to address this power imbalance. One of the drivers of the power imbalance in the system is the knowledge and understanding of the system different people have. Professionals who work in the child protection system will always have the advantage over children and families of a better understanding of how the system operates and familiarity with the language used and legal framework. Support from an advocate can ensure that there is someone with similar knowledge to support children and families to understand the system and give them the confidence to voice their wishes and feelings.

We frequently come across cases of young people and families who are asked to make choices about different options of care and support without adequate information of the implications, e.g. family members encouraged to look after children under Special Guardianship Orders, without adequate information about the impact of different statuses on the entitlement to support from services (such as the support given to kinship foster carers or available to young people after they leave care). Similarly, we see homeless 16/17 year old who are asked to choose between being accommodated under section 20 or supported under section 17, without adequate information about the implications of these decisions for their care and support into adulthood (see 'Katie's' case study above).

The lack of information does not only mean that they cannot make informed choices, or navigate the complex system that children's social care is, it also has a direct impact on their well-being. Children and young people tell us how difficult it is when they don't understand what is happening to them and why. Often the reasons that they are being taken into care are not fully explained, if at all⁶. Especially for younger children adults not explaining why they are in care is directly associated with low well-being.⁷

Whilst listening to the wishes and feelings of children should be core to the practice of all professionals in the system, to ensure that they are really heard, children need the support of professionals who do not have vested interest, but whose sole function is to put their views across, without being influenced by personal interests, resource limitations or indeed the need to make best interest judgements about the future of that child. Family members, social workers, foster carers can all advocate for the rights of children and have an important role to play in this, but they cannot replace an independent advocate. Independent advocates are there to listen and enable children and young people to communicate what they want to say, or speak for them when they do not feel comfortable to share their views. We cannot expect children and young people to always be able to speak up in a room full of professionals, who have the power to decide who they live with and what support they receive. When they are supported by an independent advocate however, children and young people can be empowered to speak up, and often being empowered to have a voice has a positive impact on their care experience and their relationships as well.

"Before I had a lack of motivation and sense of direction - I couldn't speak up and in meetings just listened. I just made decisions on gut feelings and was uncomfortable sharing them. After asking for help I feel comfortable, everyone cares and I know

⁶ https://coramvoice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Bright-Spots-insight-paper-Understanding-why-you-are-in-care_compressed-1.pdf

⁷ <https://coramvoice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Our-Lives-Our-Care-2016-FULL-REPORT-2.pdf>

what to do and have direction and am able to speak my own opinions and make good choices. Before my relationship with my care giver wasn't good, there was no compatibility, now with more listening and understanding we speak with a common voice (and think this will be OK in the future). Thank you for your help throughout this time!"

('Tierney', a looked after child describes his improved confidence and relationships after working with a Coram Voice advocate)

On our national advocacy helpline, Always Heard, we also hear from family members whose children are taken into care. They too want more information to understand the system, their rights and how they can support their children. As our service is aimed at children and young people, we can merely signpost to other support, but we find that what is available is very limited. There is unmet demand for advocacy for parents, to give them advice on the child protection process and support them to navigate the relationship with professionals.

Care leavers who become young parents where their children are then subject to local authority statutory safeguarding intervention are an important group who need access to independent advocacy and support. Having 1-1 advocacy helps young parents to understand the child protection (CP) processes; as they need time and different explanations from the children's social worker to help them process what this meant and how they could be supported by the CP plan to demonstrate their parenting skills and ability to protect their children from harmful situations. There is also the additional problem that for this group, that the local authority who has been their parent, and from whom they have received social work support, is now positioned as supporting their child and social worker focus is on their child not what support they need. In some local authorities, there is a dedicated PA who has lead responsibility supporting those PA's who provide advice and assistance to care leavers who are also young parents ensuring they continue to get support as a care leaver. This may be a positive model to replicate elsewhere.

Case study: Extracts from article written by Coram Voice Care Experienced Consultant Lauren Parker for Guardian online⁸

"I was 16 years old and eight weeks pregnant when I moved into my 12th foster care placement. I'd moved so many times over the previous two years that I missed almost all of years 10 and 11 at school. But I was looking forward to a fresh start.

I joined teenage parenting groups and met other girls in care who were pregnant. But I was shocked to find many were having their babies removed within weeks of their birth.

They were lovely girls who adored their children and were distraught at losing them. I watched as they dropped out of the group because they no longer had their babies...

When I gave birth five months later, a social worker arrived at the hospital. "We'll need to keep a close eye on you both," she said. "You're young and you're in care. So was your mother. And that puts your daughter at risk." I felt powerless and scared, but promised myself I would do everything I could to keep my baby.

I attended every parenting class and went back to college full-time when my daughter, Bee, was only three months old. I felt I was abandoning her, but the social worker told me I needed to show I wanted to create a good life.

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/nov/15/i-grew-up-in-care-i-wanted-to-break-the-cycle-and-be-the-good-parent-i-didnt-have>

I didn't even complain when, at 17 with a six-month-old baby, I was told by my social worker in the looked-after children's team that it was time to live alone. I was terrified, but I moved out and my daughter's case was closed.

The chance of her being taken away was zero. Or so I thought.

I was given a leaving care grant which did not cover my expenses, but I was frightened to ask for help. If the social worker knew I was struggling, she'd come back.

I hid my distress behind a smile. I said I didn't mind eating my meals cross-legged on the floor. I pretended I wasn't exhausted. But I couldn't lie to myself anymore when the first bills came in.

After getting into debt, the panic attacks began. I stopped leaving the house and attending college. I dressed and fed my daughter but neglected myself.

Finally, I contacted my leaving care social worker. Within a week, my daughter was placed on a child in need plan. I looked at Bee sleeping in her cot and burst into tears. I had no money, no qualifications, and anxiety. What kind of mother was I, bringing a child into my mess of a life?

And then it hit me. I had wanted to love and care for someone, and for someone to love me. I wanted a child for the same reason everyone else does, but I subconsciously wanted it at a younger age because I'd never experienced unconditional love. I wanted to be the good parent I'd never had. My mum grew up in care, as did her mum and her mum. I wanted to break the cycle.

I missed out on sex and relationships education at school. I also lacked the confidence to ask my daughter's father to use protection. I knew nothing about self-esteem....

Girls in care and care leavers need appropriate sex education and specialist, non-judgmental support to bring up their own children. When their babies are taken away before all other options have been exhausted, they lose another important person in their lives and the dreadful cycle continues.

What really made the difference for me was getting an independent advocate via a local charity; social workers didn't listen to me, but they did listen to the advocate.

I also has a very good psychologist from the leaving care team at my local council. I received cognitive behavioural therapy and did play therapy with my daughter, which helped build confidence in my parenting. I went back to college and made new friends, which helped me feel more settled and boosted my self-belief.

But what would have made the biggest difference would have been my local council giving me more advice and financial support, or signposting me to services that could have helped. Care leavers need help to fully understand our rights, and social services should do more to ensure all children in care know what support they are entitled to and the services available to support them.

I am one of the lucky ones. My beautiful seven-year-old was never placed into care. But not all care leavers can say that."

Safeguarding teenagers

We welcome the emphasis on vulnerable teenagers in the review. However, we are concerned that there is not sufficient recognition in the Case for Change of the needs of vulnerable teenagers who find themselves homeless. As indicated by the case studies above the legal protections are still not consistently implemented across the country. Research by Just4Kids Law in 2020 estimated that there are over 2,500 children housed by local authorities who should be in care.⁹ As the Case for Change suggests, when working with these young people, many agencies may be involved. When it comes to homeless young people, it is not only children's social care, health and justice that respond to vulnerable teenagers, but the role of housing departments must also be recognised.

We are also concerned about the care provided to Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC), many of whom come to the UK and enter care in their teenage years. There is minimal reference to this group of young people in the Case for Change.

We believe that a failure of the system with regards to older teenagers is that not all services and professional recognise their legal status as children and the commensurate duty to care for them where they do not have care givers to look after them. There are still instances where children are deemed to be making 'lifestyle' choices when being exposed to risk and their need for safeguarding is not always recognised. It is deemed acceptable to place them in unregulated accommodation, including bed and breakfast accommodation and hostels, where they live alongside adults who may pose a risk to them. The experience of recent UASC arrivals in Kent who are being accommodated in hotels forms part of this picture.¹⁰

The culture in services must change so that risks that all of these groups face is consistently treated as safeguarding concerns. Whilst clearly the care and support that is offered to older teenagers will not look the same as the care that is provided for younger children, this does not mean that they are not in need of care. This is also why we are deeply concerned with the assertion that some older young people in care can be supported in unregulated accommodation and deemed not to be in need of care. We see all too many children and young people housed in unsuitable and unsafe provision, where the absence of care is placing them at higher levels of risk and many report not feeling safe.

Case study: Abdo

Abdo¹¹, now aged 17 entered care age 16 when he arrived in London with little knowledge of the care system and without being able to communicate with his peers or professional network. In the borough that Abdo became looked after by, regardless of an assessment of his individual needs and wishes, he was placed in a 'semi-independent placement' for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC).

This provision was privately owned 'unregulated accommodation' where the providers were directed to provide 'support' rather than 'care' to children and young people who often require complex and individualised care. For Abdo this did not provide him with the care and support he needed. He had left his home country age 14, without knowledge of how to care for himself, how to cook or clean or manage financially and was now living in a semi-independent placement that was not equipped to provide him with the care he needed.

⁹ <http://www.crae.org.uk/media/128481/Not-in-care-not-counted-June-2020.pdf>

¹⁰ [See Children England's letter to Gavin Williamson](#)

¹¹ Not his real name

After a few months, Abdo became aware of his right to an advocate. He explained to his advocate he was spending all his time in his room, unable to communicate or socialise, feeling isolated and depressed. He additionally spoke about the poor quality and uncleanliness of the property which is a common issue raised by children and young people in unregulated placements.

Abdo was supported by Coram Voice to share his wishes with the local authority that he wanted to move to a foster care placement. He felt that living with a family would allow him to adjust to his new life in London and the support was more suitable for his needs. After a few months, the local authority agreed to find Abdo a foster care placement. He moved in with a family of similar cultural heritage and lifestyle from his home country and is now studying and enjoying his new life in the UK.

Despite in February 2021 the Government announcing a ban on the use of unregulated accommodation for Under 16's to come into force in September 2021, this would have not changed Abdo's experience, or many other 16 and 17 year old children in unregulated 'support only' placements.

We recognise the importance of good quality residential care as being a positive choice for many young people who do not want to live in a foster family. Where residential care is well run and well managed it can provide a stable loving home for young people. It is, however important that residential workers are trained to a minimum qualification standard, and are equipped to support and care for the young people with complex needs and trauma, who are often under their care.

Partnerships across agencies and local authorities may also be necessary when working with families whose children are at risk outside of the home. For example, our advocates report cases where children's services have recommended a child/young person move location due to risk, but housing have said they would not in be in priority need elsewhere. In this situation it has been decided a child cannot live in an area due to safety, the family is expected to move with the child and often lose their reliable council tenancy. They cannot transfer their housing points to a new area where they will be placed in temporary housing, with no guarantee of securing a future tenancy. The family may also have commitments in the area, support networks, as well as children in local schools. These circumstances make the risk of moving too high and ultimately the child may remain at risk. Greater cooperation between services and parity of entitlement would make a move a reasonable option for the family and the child. Partnership with housing to secure suitable accommodation may also make it easier to secure kinship care placements, and reducing stressors of overcrowding that could lead to placements breaking down.

I would like a house. There is not much space. I am sleeping in the living room and don't even have my own bedroom. (Your Life Your Care survey, 11-18 year old in kinship care)

I'd like a bigger house as I don't have a bedroom and I have to share with my nephews who are 8 and 5 so it is very overcrowded. (Your Life Your Care survey, 11-18 year old in kinship care)

Parity of entitlement for children in kinship care is also important. From our advocacy services we know that some children who would like to live with family, are aware of the differences in entitlements this could confer on them if this arrangement is not as a looked after child and therefore choose to enter care and live with an unrelated carer to make sure they have entitlements to for example leaving care support and education support later in life.

Children in care and care leavers with a disability and long term health condition

There is very little mention of children in care and care leavers with a disability and long-term health condition in the Case for Change. Our experience from the Bright Spots programme and our frontline advocacy is that this is often a particularly vulnerable group, which need special consideration. We found that care leavers are more likely to report a disability or long-term health condition than young people in the general population. This group of care leavers had lower well-being and were lonelier and less likely to have goals and plans for the future. Compared with other care leavers fewer felt safe and settled where they lived and more struggled financially.

Particular issues relating to children in care and care leavers with disabilities that it would have been important for the case for change to cover are:

- Challenges experienced by young people making the transition from children to adult services
- The need for disabled care leavers to be allocated a Personal Adviser and have a pathway plan, even if they have an adult social worker: although this is their right, this sometimes does not happen in reality.
- The need for placements that can meet the needs of children with complex disabilities, and the funding to pay for these.
- Overlap with the mental capacity act and how legislation works in tandem: e.g. the need for additional support by local authorities around finances when a care leaver lacks capacity to apply for their own benefits etc.

This is an area where the local authority may need to take the role of a pushy parent. For many disabled children, parents are often their strongest advocate, pushing services to provide the care and support that meets their needs. When the state is a child's parent the same strong advocacy may not always be there. There is sometimes buck passing between different services and an acceptance of poor status quo when a child or young person has been denied a service, rather than pushing for further support.

Case study: Alison

Alison was a 17 year old looked after child when she was referred to Coram Voice's advocacy service. At this time she was living in a specialist children's home. Alison had autism and a learning disability

Alison's support workers referred her for an advocate five months before her 18th birthday, as there had been no discussions about her transition to adulthood: Alison was expressing anxieties about where she would live as an adult, and who would help her with things. Alison spoke to her social worker in Children's Services who agreed to follow this up, but the plans remained unclear.

A Coram Voice advocate met with Alison and discussed her worries about the future. She also advised Alison of her rights: The advocate explained that a transition assessment should have been undertaken, so that a plan could be made for when Alison turns 18. The advocate wrote to Alison's social worker's manager. As a result of this, a referral was made for a transition social worker, who completed an assessment. Alison then visited some supported living providers and a new home was identified.

Alison moved in to her new home and began to settle in. By this time she was 18 and a care leaver. However, she still did not have all of the support she needed: Although

Alison had a social worker with Adult Services; she had no allocated personal adviser in the Leaving Care Team. She also had a lot of difficulty understanding and managing money, because of her learning disability. However no one had helped her to make a benefits claim or access her setting up home allowance. The advocate supported Alison to make a complaint: As a result a personal adviser was allocated, who met with Alison to complete a pathway plan. The personal adviser also supported Alison to make a benefits claim, and adult social care completed a mental capacity assessment regarding finances. Following this and another meeting, an appointee was arranged to support Alison with managing her money.

Alison is now enjoying life in her new home. She has been supported to purchase some items for her bedroom, using her setting up home allowance. Alison's personal adviser is now focusing on supporting Alison with her education, by helping her to apply for a college course for next academic year. Alison is now feeling positive about the future and gaining skills for independence. She has a social worker and personal adviser who are making sure she has access to support, as well as the staff at her home

It is therefore all the more important that these children and young people are proactively offered advocacy to help ensure they get the support that they need, especially as they may not be in a position to request advocacy support themselves. We know through the work of the Always Heard helpline, that disabled children in care may not always be able to access advocacy that meets their needs. At least 13% of advocacy providers are unable to provide Non-Instructed Advocacy to young people with disabilities who need it.¹²

Many of the long term health conditions that young people experience are mental health related. The system is woefully inadequate in meeting this need. Although there is mention of this in the Case for Change much more emphasis needs to be put on getting access to mental health support both whilst children and young people are in care and as care leavers.

Good care

We believe we should not just aspire to create a care system that is 'good enough' but the state should aim to be the best parent it could be. Part of this is a system that both cares **for** and cares **about** children and young people. We need to emphasise care not only as an action, but as a feeling. A good care system would be one where children feel **cared about** as well as **cared for** by having their needs met.

The review rightly recognises that positive relationships are at the heart of this and we know from our Bright Spots work that there are both social workers and PAs who do an excellent job in building that long term relationship with children and young people so that they do feel cared about.

"He will call me regularly to check in with me and make sure I am ok which makes me feel very secure." (Care leaver, Your Life Beyond Care survey)

Professionals need to feel supported in order to have the capacity to care. Time to build rapport is an essential component of building trust. Through our advocacy services we see that all too often unmanageable caseloads result in poor relationship building with children and young people, both for social workers and personal advisors. This is echoed by young people:

¹² <https://coramvoice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Always-Heard-Report-2020.pdf>

*“Social workers and care leaver workers need to have less people allocated to them. They clearly do not have enough time for all the people that are allocated to them...”
(Care leaver)*

Our advocates also report that high caseloads mean that social workers may delegate most of the direct work to other professionals such as key workers, who may be less qualified to assess needs.

Pushy parent

We agree with the emphasis in the Case for Change for the state to be a ‘pushy parent’. This means that children’s services should step up and advocate for children in care to make sure that they get the right provision. This means taking responsibility and swift action when a child is not happy with a placement. We come across young people who have problems with their children’s homes or unregulated provided, but they are directed by the local authority to go back and complain to the provider, rather than the local authority taken up their cause and making sure that the situation is addressed.

Similarly, we encounter UASC in our advocacy services who have been expected to manage regularising their own immigration status, rather than the local authority managing this for them. A pushy parent would seek to resolve these issues for the child or young person, not expect them to resolve it themselves.

The drop in support that care leavers experience when they turn 18, is particularly concerning. Our Bright Spots surveys revealed a steep decline in well-being when young people leave care and the sudden requirement to manage on your own is particularly difficult for many young people who have not been adequately prepared.

“Young people need to have more autonomy over their own lives. We’re expected to go off at 18 and manage adulthood when we have never had any control over what happens in our lives” (Care leaver)

Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) do have the potential to take on more of that pushy parent role in a child’s care, although they are generally not maintained for young people once they leave care. Through our advocacy services we have seen how good IROs are really important for young people in care and would expect less children to need advocacy if the IRO is fulfilling their role.

Monitoring and inspection

If the aim of children’s social care is to make the lives of care experienced children and young people better, by focusing on the issues that matter most to them, then children’s voices need to be at the heart of accountability structures.

To ensure that care can make their lives better, monitoring and inspection must focus on the things that are important to children. The review rightly points out that ‘when children in care describe what matters to them - they talk about their carer, friends, pets and school’. We also know from our Bright Spots work that there are a range of other key issues that children in care and care leavers say make their lives good. These are set out in our briefing for the Care Review¹³.

¹³ <https://coramvoice.org.uk/latest/voices-of-care-experienced-children-and-young-people-must-be-at-the-heart-of-government-care-review/>

Although there should be external scrutiny the ultimate accountability should not be to Ofsted, but to the children and young people receiving care. Sheffield's reverse scrutiny panel is a good example of the local authority have tried to embed accountability to young people.¹⁴

Resources

Whilst money is not a guarantee of good provision the impact of austerity on services for children in care and care leavers cannot be ignored. The review asks the important question "do we genuinely have properly independent relationship based advocacy which can support children to contribute meaningfully to their care journey". The answer is yes for some children and young people some of the time, but as the recent Always Heard report has pointed out not, the provision is not consistent.¹⁵ Part of the reason for the inconsistency is the limitations placed on services by the contracts commissioned. Barriers to advocacy include not offering services to young people placed out of area or to the whole age range entitled to services; provision that is not accessible to young people with disabilities, not having free phone lines or access to translators to communicate in the young person's language. Local authorities must be expected to commission services that meet the full brief of provision, or alternatives sought to commissioning that can ensure that all children and young people can access advocacy services.

Of course, adequate funding is necessary but not sufficient to ensure good quality services. In addition the development of new National standards for advocacy will be important to drive up quality of advocacy services across the country.

Further information

For further information about Coram Voice work please see www.coramvoice.org.uk.

¹⁴ For a video that presents the details of the panel see:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7st2vueNBsA>

¹⁵ <https://coramvoice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Always-Heard-Report-2020.pdf>