



# Embedding youth voice in children's social care

**May 2023**

## Listen to the child

There's so many things that need to change around the foster care system. It is so important that the government, the people who have the power to make a difference, take some time to listen to children and young people who have experienced being in the care system. To them, this is just a job, but this is our lives. They have so much power to change the way things are.

Over the years I personally feel the system has gotten worse, the lack of awareness of what it is like to be in foster and how hard it is.

There were so many points I wanted to talk about from Stable Homes, Built on Love - the first one - LISTEN TO THE CHILD. I was told my whole childhood to speak up when I wasn't happy, there were so many occasions I reached out for help and no one was there, this is still continuing till this day. I have so much I want to say and so much I want to change.

**Chloe (Care experienced A National Voice Ambassador and Chair of ANV)**

## Contents

Listen to the child.....	2
About us .....	4
Coram Voice .....	4
The Bright Spots Programme .....	4
Advocacy .....	4
A National Voice.....	5
Overview .....	5
Why is youth voice important?.....	6
Realising children’s rights .....	7
Incorporating children’s voices in a national framework and outcomes measures .....	7
Representing everyone’s experience.....	8
The Lundy Model of participation .....	8
Involvement at all levels of decision-making.....	9
Space .....	10
Voice.....	11
Audience .....	12
Influence .....	13
Focusing on what is important to children and young people.....	14
Focus on well-being .....	15
Measuring well-being .....	15
Learning from the Bright Spots programme.....	16
Embedding coproduction – learning from the New Belongings programme .....	17
Hearing children and young people and Making change happen through co-production .....	17
Further developments .....	18
Recommendations .....	19
Make listening a core mission.....	19
Embed wellbeing.....	21
Advocacy for all.....	24
Developing a system that continuously learns and improves.....	24
Understanding current mechanisms to capture voice .....	24
Developing a structure to embed youth voice .....	25
Senior leadership .....	26

## About us

### Coram Voice

- Coram Voice is a leading children's rights charity that 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 believes children and young people are the experts in their lives, so we empower them to be central in the decision-making processes that affect them.
- Our aim is to make sure children and young people who are dependent on the care of the state know their rights. We support them to navigate the care system through our advocacy work; we challenge decisions taken about them wherever necessary and we ensure their rights and well-being are protected.

### The Bright Spots Programme

- Our Bright Spots Programme, developed in partnership with Professor Julie Selwyn (University of Oxford) has been working with children in care since 2013, and care leavers from 2017, to understand what needs to be in place to enable these children and young people to flourish.
- The Bright Spots Programme focuses on how children and young people's voices can feed into organisational system wide learning. Importantly it does not focus on how well services are doing, but how children and young people themselves feel that they are doing – do they feel happy, safe and have good relationships.
- The Programme helps local authorities to systematically gather the views of their children and young people. Hearing children's voices can change practice and policy. Findings are used to influence individual practice, service development and delivery and strategic thinking, which is essential in ensuring that children's views and well-being is at the heart of delivering high quality services.
- The Programme uses four online surveys of well-being to capture the views of children and young people in care (a survey for each of the ages 4-7yrs, 8-10yrs and 11-17 yrs), and care leavers (age 16 to 25yrs). To date, the Bright Spots surveys have been completed by over 24,000 children and young people from almost 80 local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales.

### Advocacy

- At Coram Voice, our committed and professional Advocates provide child-centred advocacy in a range of settings to meet the needs of children and young people.
- We provide advocacy in:
  - The community, with children in care, care leavers and children in need through local authorities and the police.
  - Child protection process.
  - Secure children's homes.
  - Residential children's homes and therapeutic communities.

- In patient and secure mental health settings.
- Specialist schools and residential placements for children with disabilities.
- Funded by the Department for Education, our Always Heard service means that, for the first time, there is a single national advocacy advice service in England and gateway that young people can use. Through Always Heard, young people now can access vital advocacy services across the country and an advocacy ‘safety net’, for when things go wrong and they cannot get advocacy from their local service.

## A National Voice

- A National Voice (ANV) is the ‘National Children in Care Council’ for children in care and care leavers aged 11-26, who are passionate about how the care system works and how it affects those within it.
- They work to improve the care system through the voices of care experienced young people. They empower children and young people by giving them the skills and support to make real change at both a local and national level.
- Key to A National Voice is the ‘A National Voice Ambassadors Group’, which is a core group of young people aged 16-26 recruited annually from across the country, to represent each region and bridge the gap between local and national campaigns.

## Overview

To develop outcomes measures that authentically capture youth voice, work must be directly linked to the practices and structures that are used to involve and engage children and young people. Therefore, a first step before developing specific outcomes measures and metrics is to explore and map what these practices and structures currently are and, importantly, what they should be.

There is a commitment to the principle of youth voice throughout the Stable Homes, Built with Love strategy and National Framework, but not enough is said about how to make this promise a reality. This paper highlights what our extensive experience of engaging care experienced children and young people has taught us about what needs to be in place for decision makers in children’s social care (and government) to hear and act on the voices of children and young people and what that may mean for an outcomes framework.

In this paper we set out specific actions that should be taken to realise youth voice, in particular we make three key recommendations to inform the government’s implementation strategy and national framework:

1. Create a new mission to embed youth voice by putting in place the structures and systems to make the right to be heard a reality for all children and young people.
2. Focus more on making life better for children and young people by making well-being, as defined by children and young people themselves, a key pillar for children’s social care.
3. Support children and young people to be heard and safeguard their rights by giving them the information about their rights and providing opt out independent advocacy

for all children and young people throughout and beyond the care system (including in child protection, kinship care, care leavers etc.)

## Why is youth voice important?

As a Children’s Rights Charity we believe in every child’s right to be heard and that their views should be taken seriously in line with Article 12 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

However, many children and young people report that they do not feel involved in decisions. As the Bright Spots findings show this includes decisions about their own care, as well as decisions about the care system more widely.



“Since I came into care, I have had no control over any aspects of my life. Social services control where I live, what I do and how I do it. I hate living in care.”  
(Teenager in care, Bright Spots Survey)

We know from our Bright Spots programme and wider research that being involved in decision making is important to children and young people’s well-being<sup>1</sup>. Being heard empowers young people and helps them feel valued and important.

“Kids feel important when you involve them in stuff about their life.”  
(Teenager in care, Bright Spots survey)

Other research has found that having a sense of control over your life is linked to self-esteem and fewer mental health problems, and that young people who see events as largely outside their control can have more emotional problems, especially when coping with stress.<sup>2</sup>

Through our work with local authorities on co-producing changes to services with young people we have seen the impact of including young people in decision-making and service development.

“[Being involved] has helped me feel heard and feel positive about the future of care leavers. This has also made me feel like some things can be changed for the better.

---

<sup>1</sup> Selwyn, J & Briheim-Crookall, L (2022) *10,000 Voices: the views of children in care on their well-being*, Coram Voice and Rees Centre, University of Oxford. <https://coramvoice.org.uk/for-professionals/bright-spots/resource-bank/10091/>

<sup>2</sup> Huebner, E. S., Ash, C., & Laughlin, J. E. (2001). Life experiences, locus of control, and school satisfaction in adolescence. *Soc. Indic. Res.* 55, 167–183. Tangney, J. P., Baumeister, R. F., and Boone, A. L. (2004). *High self-control predicts good adjustment, less pathology, better grades, and interpersonal success.* *J. Pers* 72, 271–322. Nigg, J. T. (2017). Annual research review: on the relations among self-regulation, self-control, executive functioning, effortful control, cognitive control, impulsivity, risk-taking, and inhibition for developmental psychopathology. *JCCP* 58, 361–383.

This is a sense of relief because sometimes in the care system you feel like you're going to get nowhere. You feel trapped and lost and forever lonely but all these changes that have come into place through the New Belongings (Project) have carried on to benefit many others and I would like to carry on seeing these changes progress and stay in place in the future. So I am really happy to be a part of this.”  
(Care experienced young person involved in New Belongings co-production project)

Involvement in co-production and participation helps children and young people grow by developing new skills and opens new opportunities. It gives them an insight into how systems work and how they can best inform change. Care experienced young people have a wealth of knowledge and creativity, which without the right spaces to be heard remains untapped.

“It changed my life. It showed me that somebody wanted to hear what I had to say and that I was important and that my experiences mattered and I hadn't gone through all this rubbish stuff for no reason and it helped me find my path and I wouldn't be where I am without it”. (Care experienced ANV Ambassador)

## **Realising children's rights**

Rights without recourse are meaningless. Children and young people cannot claim rights that they are not aware of. It is therefore essential that children and young people are aware of their rights and entitlements, including the right to be heard, and what they can do if those rights are not being supported.

Advocacy provides an ongoing mechanism to ensure the voice of children is heard in decision making. Children and young people's advocates are different from other professionals in the Children's Social Care system in that they are child led and focus on representing their views and wishes to decision makers and helping children and young people navigate an often complex system designed for and by adults. Advocacy has an important role to play in safeguarding children and young people by making sure their experiences and concerns are focused on.

We welcome the commitment to opt out independent advocacy for children in care and care leavers and recommend that this support should be made available to all children in touch with children's social care offered at the point of initial contact/assessments.

## **Incorporating children's voices in a national framework and outcomes measures**

Children and young people's voice should be embedded at all levels of decision making. Even young children can be supported to have a say in their care and have important things to say about their lives. Adults just have a greater responsibility to adapt to and communicate with children in a way that is suitable to their age and developmental stage.

Children and young people should have a say in the plans made about their own care as well as opportunities to inform the services that deliver that care and the system within which those services operate. Our work has consistently shown that there is not one specific activity that can embed youth voice, instead the important thing is to provide a range of different opportunities to be heard and taking action in response.

## Representing everyone's experience

Our response draws on our experience of working with children in care and care leavers, but many of the principles could equally be applied to children in need or accessing early help. More work is needed to develop engagement with these groups and the Department could take a lead in encouraging more work in this area at both the local and national level.

It will always be important to find ways to gather the views of children to inform their individual care, but it is important to be mindful that at certain points it may not be appropriate to involve them in wider co-production and participation. Young people experiencing crisis/upheaval may need some time to settle before this is appropriate.

Young people are most helpfully engaged by people who they trust and who they have had a chance to build up a trusting relationship with. This means that voice needs to be embedded in the everyday interactions and local frameworks and services that children and young people access. This includes their interactions with children's social care professionals, charities and other services that support them.

## The Lundy Model of participation

The approach to youth voice and engagement should be rights based and the well-known Lundy model of participation,<sup>3</sup> which is used by a number of international organisations and national governments, will provide a helpful structure to set up meaningful engagement and evaluate whether and how effective approaches are for listening and responding to voice. It focuses on 4 key areas to embed young people's rights to be heard (as set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child):

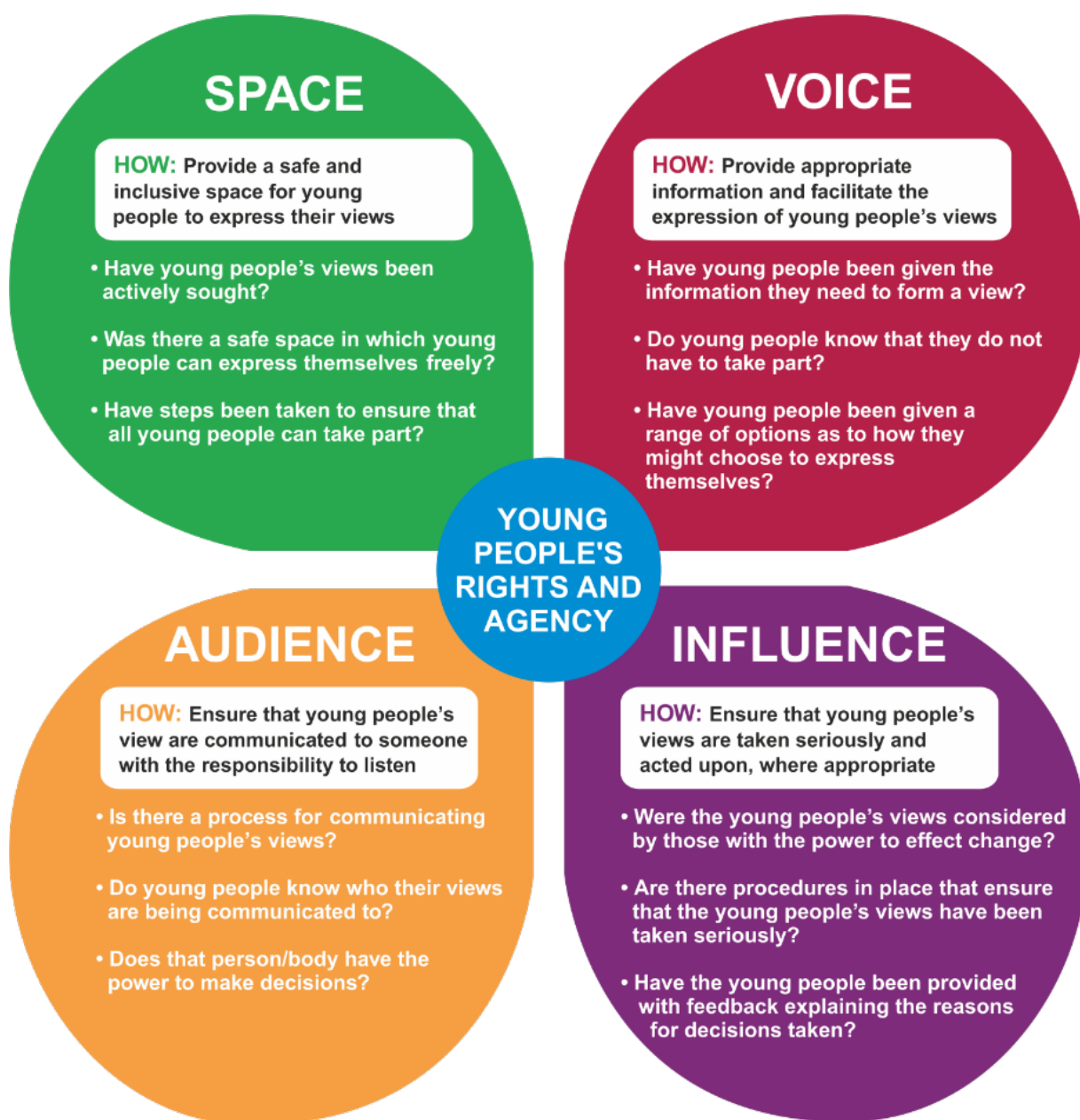
- **SPACE:** Children must be given the opportunity to express a view
- **VOICE:** Children must be facilitated to express their views
- **AUDIENCE:** The view must be listened to.
- **INFLUENCE:** The view must be acted upon, as appropriate.

---

<sup>3</sup> The Lundy model was developed by Prof Laura Lundy, at Queen's University Belfast  
<https://www.qub.ac.uk/Research/case-studies/childrens-participation-lundy-model.html>



## Lundy's Voice Model Checklist for Participation: <sup>4</sup>



## Involvement at all levels of decision-making

To strengthen children's voice in decision-making, as suggested by the care review, listening and acting on children and young people's views should be prioritised at all levels. A national framework for children's social care must integrate voice into the descriptions of how leaders and practitioners should strive to make positive outcomes for children in care a reality. The way any outcomes measures are designed is also important. It is essential that

---

<sup>4</sup> Department for Children & Youth Affairs (2015) National strategy on children and young people's participation in decision-making 2015-2020  
<https://assets.gov.uk/24462/48a6f98a921446ad85829585389e57de.pdf>

ongoing consultation with children and young people is central to any outcomes framework that is developed.

Any outcomes framework should capture whether children and young people feel involved and informed in their care. They should have opportunities to be heard not just at the individual, but also operational and strategic level. They should be asked about what is important to them and at all these levels not just asked to share their views, but also see how what they say informs changes.

### Listening and influencing change at all levels of decision making:



To make this a reality requires that:

1. Tools and resources to facilitate youth voice are available.
2. Structures and processes ensure that what young people share can be heard by those who can make a change.
3. Systems to identify common patterns and challenges that young people bring up in 1-2-1 work or across local authorities
4. Voice is valued and prioritised at all levels by practitioners as well as leaders.
5. Where children and young people do not feel heard there is child friendly support and mechanisms to challenge decisions.

### Space

A range of opportunities are needed to provide children and young people with a safe inclusive space to have their voice heard. All these need to be resourced and supported by skilled workers who can build trust and communicate with children and young people.

#### Personal (individual care)

In their individual care some examples of this could include: workers getting to know children and young people and what is important to them, having time alone with social workers to be able to express their views freely, children chairing reviews, child friendly care plans or apps that allow them to share their views, being able to easily get in touch with social workers to discuss concerns and ask for help.

### Operational (Local Authority and partners)

There should be resources and skilled staff available to facilitate engagement through structures like Children in Care Councils and Care Leaver Forums. There should also be opportunities to get involved in particular projects that are of interest for those that do not want to take part in regular participation forums. These groups tend to be smaller and more selective. Other ways to give more young people the opportunities to engage are important too, e.g. online surveys for children and young people to share how they feel about their lives (Bright Spots), creative arts projects that allow children and young people to express their views<sup>5</sup> or one off sessions or projects to inform particular aspects of care. Local charities are often important partners in these domains and there may be groups in different services/partners that can engage different groups of young people. There may be specific posts created for care experienced trainees, ambassadors or consultants to help facilitate engagement.

### Systemic (National Government)

At a national level space could include a national board of young people regularly consulted with links to regional or local structures like children in care councils, national surveys or collation of local surveys, one off events, webinars or projects to explore specific issues. Throughout all these levels there is also a question about how learning from children and young people about their views at an individual and organisational level is collated and fed through to make systemic change. Youth engagement should ensure that views can be fed up through the Children's Social Care system.

## Voice

Children and young people need the right information and support, tailored to their needs to express their views. Materials work best that are fun and engaging and make the issues covered relatable and meaningful. To ensure information is accessible and adapted to all requires both time and resources.

### Personal (individual care)

To be able to make informed decisions about their care children and young people need to know why specific decisions are made and what options are available to them. It is imperative that children understand their rights to be able to inform decisions about their care. Children and young people continue to tell us about missing out on support that they were not aware was, or should, be available. All too often children and young people tell that us no one has fully explained to them why they are in care or that they do not know why specific decisions have been made or what the plans are for their care. Child friendly plans (an initiative developed with children) like Sheffield's Fridge plan<sup>6</sup> could assist with this. Workers should proactively be informing children and young people about their rights and there should be accessible sources of information for both children in care and care leavers (e.g. local offers). To ensure that all young people have the capacity to share their views they should have access to opt out independent advocates, and advocacy services

---

<sup>5</sup> <https://coramvoice.org.uk/for-professionals/bright-spots/resource-bank/hopes-and-fears-posters/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://coramvoice.org.uk/for-professionals/bright-spots/resource-bank/sheffield-fridge-plan/>

also have an important role in making children and young people aware of their rights. For younger or disabled children non-instructed advocacy may be needed.

#### Operational (Local Authority and partners) & Systemic (National Government)

At both the local and national it is important that any consultations, questions and materials are in a format that is accessible to children and young people. This could include videos as well as written information or sessions with more creative, interactive materials to discuss particular issues. Skilled participation workers are often essential to help adapt information and create engaging sessions and materials. Meaningful participation requires both resources and time to make sure it is accessible, fun and engaging. As with space more than one way to engage is often needed to make sure all young people have a voice. Some prefer group discussion, others like taking part in one on one sessions or prefer to share their views anonymously.

To make our Bright Spots surveys accessible an important aspect is thinking (in conjunction with young people and local authority representatives) about how young people can be supported to complete them. Whilst we use online forms, paper copies are also made available for those who may not have internet access. Informed consent is sought; we make sure that we are transparent about what is happening with the data, who will read it and what it will be used for and that responses are anonymous to encourage respondents to complete them openly and honestly. We use a trusted adult model to support especially younger children or those who may struggle with reading and writing to complete the survey. These cannot be social workers or foster carers as there are questions about them in the survey and we want children to feel they can be honest about how they feel about them.

#### Audience

Children and young people's views need to be communicated to the people who have the power to make changes to their lives. Direct engagement is often most powerful, giving young people the opportunity to directly share their experiences, but such approaches are only ever limited to a small number of children and young people. These opportunities should be complemented with broader ways of gathering collective voice, such as surveys or information directly from individual care plans. What will be important is to put in place mechanisms to share information from different levels of engagement with decision makers at all levels.

#### Personal (individual care)

Children's social workers are often key decision makers in a child's individual care, but many others also have an important role to play in responding to children's wishes and feelings. If there are systemic barriers that are preventing the realisation of children's wishes there should be ways for workers to communicate this both to young people and to decision makers at the operational and systemic level. Mechanisms to identify thematic issues will be important. Managers may be able to identify trends through audit of case files, as well as trends in complaints, advocacy issues and recurrent issues identified by IROs, virtual school colleagues and other aligned partners.

### Operational (Local Authority and partners)

A commitment to listening to young people from senior leadership is vital. Leaders should lead by example by prioritising youth voice and listening to children and young people and embedding co-production in the development of services. Sharing the views of children e.g. through Children in Care Councils should be integrated into corporate parenting boards (and equivalent parts of children's social care). Lead members and Directors should have regular opportunities to meet children and young people through events or participation groups. If young people are being asked to share their views to surveys like the Bright Spots surveys, leaders should have a plan and communicate what they will do with the findings and how will they work with young people to set priorities for change. Local authority partners will be really important in addressing some of children and young people's experiences. For example, in The New Belongings programme that worked with care leavers to improve leaving care support, health and housing partners were important in addressing the issues that care leavers raised.<sup>7</sup>

### Systemic (National Government)

Ministers and key civil servants across Government departments should have the opportunity to hear directly from children and young people. Structures should be in place allowing any issues identified locally to be shared nationally with key decision makers. The Department for Education should link with existing champions like the Children's Commissioner and national charities supporting children and young people's voices as well as local participation groups like Children in Care Councils.

### Influence

It is essential to demonstrate that children and young people's views are taken seriously and acted upon. Children and young people need to see how what they say informs changes and have opportunities to prioritise what is most important as well as contribute ideas as to what the changes could be.

### Personal (individual care)

When children and young people can see that their views inform the decisions that social workers make about their lives it makes them feel valued and important and it is linked to improved well-being. Even when they cannot achieve what is wanted clear communication about why different decisions are made is essential. Having mechanisms to challenge decisions and review progress is important. All children and young people should have access to opt out independent advocacy and information about their rights and how to challenge where they are not getting the support they have a right to, including information about and access to child friendly complaints processes<sup>8</sup>. An important metric in any

---

<sup>7</sup> Story of New Belongings, Coram Voice <https://coramvoice.org.uk/for-professionals/bright-spots/resource-bank/new-belongings-final-report/>

<sup>8</sup> See ANV response to the Care review for suggestions around how to improve complaints processes <https://coramvoice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/What-children-and-young-people-want-to-tell-the-care-review-report.pdf>

outcomes framework should be the ability to capture whether children and young people feel involved in and informed about their care.

#### Operational (Local Authority and partners)

Service improvements should be guided by co-production principles. Hearing children's voice can lead to change. There are a range of examples where local authorities have worked with children and young people to co-produce and pilot projects and introduce service changes.<sup>9</sup> The Bright Spots Resource Hub<sup>10</sup> showcases how different local authorities have utilised children and young people's views to inform change. The best initiatives actively work with children and young people to develop solutions, not just identifying problems. Clearly communicating plans and accountability to children and young people themselves is important, e.g. Hull's Corporate Parenting Strategy<sup>11</sup> and Sheffield's scrutiny panel.<sup>12</sup>

#### Systemic (National Government)

It is important to demonstrate to young people how their voices are heard in national decisions. Not only producing youth friendly guides to Government policy, but including information how children and young people's voices informed decisions is essential – simple “you said, we did” (or to push the agenda, “you said, we did together”, messaging can be effective. It is important that engagement is not a one way process, in addition to asking children and young people about their views, the Department for Education and Children's Minister should also be clear about what they plan to do as a result and provide regular feedback on progress e.g. through video clip (for inspiration at the local level see Hull's film made by social workers to explain what they will do as a result of listening to how children in care are feeling<sup>13</sup>). They should report on how they are working with partners to achieve change. Children and young people should have the opportunity to identify their own priorities and co-produce change. There should be youth led scrutiny of progress e.g. through a young person's board or regular opportunities for the network of existing participation groups to come together and question national decision makers.

## Focusing on what is important to children and young people

True participation gives children and young people opportunities to set their own agenda. It should not just focus on what children and young people think about adult priorities but also allow them to focus on the things that are important to them (which may well be different from an adult-led agenda).

---

<sup>9</sup> See (2023) Story of New Belongings, Coram Voice <https://coramvoice.org.uk/for-professionals/bright-spots/resource-bank/new-belongings-final-report/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://coramvoice.org.uk/for-professionals/bright-spots/resource-bank/>

<sup>11</sup> For more information see <https://coramvoice.org.uk/for-professionals/bright-spots/resource-bank/childrens-voice-shaping-policy-and-practice/>

<sup>12</sup> For more information see <https://coramvoice.org.uk/for-professionals/bright-spots/resource-bank/sheffield-young-peoples-scrutiny-panel/>

<sup>13</sup> For more information see <https://coramvoice.org.uk/for-professionals/bright-spots/resource-bank/listening-and-responding-to-children-and-young-peoples-views/>

A national framework and outcomes measures focusing on what is important to children and young people will ensure a greater focus on children and young people's priorities.

The Bright Spots programme has over the last 10 years worked with children in care and care leavers to explore what makes their lives good. The Bright Spots indicators reflect the things that children and young people felt made their lives good and embedding these themes in any outcomes framework will put children and young people's voices at the heart of the children's care system.<sup>14</sup>

## Focus on well-being

Whilst we agree that the Strategy paper's pillars and the National Framework's Outcomes & Enablers are important areas for reform, the vision and work will be enhanced if there is a greater focus on (subjective) well-being in the Strategy and National framework. We feel that underlying all the pillars should be a principle of promoting well-being and supporting positive outcomes, not just avoiding negative outcomes.

The outcome that we should aim for is for state intervention and care to give children a better childhood than they would otherwise have had, so that children are safe and supported to flourish and grow up to live full and successful adult lives. To do this Children's Social Care must focus more on what children and young people say well-being is to them.

Positive relationships and safe and stable homes would all be important aspects to contribute to children's well-being, but so would having opportunities to have fun and do similar things to friends, enjoying school free from bullying and having trusted and available social workers .

We believe that the focus on stable homes built with love (which is undoubtedly important) has led to a misalignment within the national framework and the proposed indicators. For example, supporting children's aspirations and providing educational opportunities is important to children flourishing, but it is not necessarily linked to love, relationships and a stable home. You could have one without the other.

## Measuring well-being

The Bright Spots programme has co-produced a number of well-being indicators with children in care and care leavers.<sup>15</sup> These indicators will be important to include when implementing the strategy and designing a new National Framework. In addition to

---

<sup>14</sup> Voices Improving Care team (2020) *The Voices of Children In Care and Care Leavers on What Makes Life good: Recommendations for Reviewing the Care System*, Coram Voice & the Rees Centre at the University of Oxford

Selwyn, J. & Briheim-Crookall, L. (2022) *10,000 Voices: The views of children in care on their well-being*, Coram Voice and the Rees Centre, University of Oxford

Briheim-Crookall, L. *et al* (2020) *What Makes Life Good, Care leavers' Views on their Well-being'*, Coram Voice & the Rees Centre, University of Oxford

<sup>15</sup> For a full overview of the indicators see Voices Improving Care team (2020) *The Voices of Children In Care and Care Leavers on What Makes Life good: Recommendations for Reviewing the Care System*, Coram Voice & the Rees Centre at the University of Oxford

potentially using the Your Life, Your Care and Your Life Beyond Care survey tools to gather cohort data, there could be scope to embed some of the aspects covered by the Bright Spots indicators in care and pathway planning and explore the use of the surveys in evaluating specific interventions (as is being tested in Wales as part of the care leaver Basic Income Pilot).

We believe all local authorities would benefit from using the Bright Spots surveys to listen to the views of their children and young people, but we caution against a framework that would impose their collection without local strategic buy in. When asking how children and young people feel about their lives, it is essential that both operational and senior leaders are committed to listen and respond to what they say. We do not want to see local authorities undertaking work to listen to their children through the Bright spots programme unless there is clear commitment to action and working on changes based on what children say.

To make participation meaningful for young people they need to see the changes that are being made as a result. To ask children and young people for their views without acting on what is being said is unethical and is likely to affect engagement in the long run. Data collection about children and young people should therefore be linked to a youth engagement framework where there is an ongoing dialogue with children and young people and, commitment to children being involved in interpreting the data and identifying what needs to be done in response.

The long-term use of the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaires as a key indicator in the Government national data set provides a cautionary tale. In many cases local authorities collect this information for sole purpose of supplying the national data sets, but do not use the information to inform individual children's care or services.

## Learning from the Bright Spots programme

There is a wealth of data about what is important to children and young people and what impacts on their well-being gathered by the Bright Spots programme (over 24,000 responses and collaboration with nearly 80 local authorities in the UK).

With additional resource and commitment from the Department to listen/respond much more could be done with the existing Bright Spots data to capitalise on the learning about children and young people's experiences. We continue to work with local authorities to measure their children in care and care leavers' well-being. Every year Coram Voice collect thousands of responses to the Bright Spots surveys.

We have the potential to produce an annual (point in time) update on how children are feeling which could be timed to accompany the annual Framework - it would cover the full set of what children in care and care leavers feel matters to a good life. There is also scope to delve into the qualitative data that is collected, including children and young people's comments on what would make care better. We would welcome discussion about how we could work together with the Department to add depth of understanding to the planned national framework.



When using the Bright Spots survey data as a learning tool, it is not the individual well-being indicators themselves that give the most useful insights, but the potential to analyse how they relate to each other. Understanding the factors that are associated with high and low well-being; whether particular groups of young people are doing better or worse than others; exploring the qualitative comments to the survey to look for particular issues that children and young people experience locally are examples of this.

Our Bright Spots analysis has shown that social care professionals should be mindful of the well-being concerns of different groups of children in care and care leavers, especially girls and those in residential care or living 'somewhere else' as well as young people who report a disability or long term health condition. Data sets need to be able to drill down into these different experiences by easily identifying different groups (such as disabled children and young people). Professionals need to be aware of how identity can impact on well-being, and consider whether particular children and young people may require additional or adapted support.

## Embedding coproduction – learning from the New Belongings programme

The New Belongings Programme ran from 2019-2022 and worked with eight local authorities using the Bright Spots programme's [Your Life Beyond Care survey](#) and the [Baker Dixon self-assessment-framework](#) to better understand what makes life good for their care leavers and how to improve the support they are offering.

Using this information the authorities worked with their young people to co-produce solutions to the issues they have identified. The core message of the New Belongings programme is simple: to deliver the best support and services to care leavers you must work alongside young people.

## Hearing children and young people and Making change happen through co-production

We identified 5 cornerstones to make the New Belongings approach successful:

- Co-production
- Senior leadership commitment
- Resources to engage and deliver
- Partnership working
- Peer learning

The important lesson from New Belongings is that the value comes from working with young people locally to develop solutions that they feel will make the most difference to their local context. Not only does this identify the changes that are relevant to care leavers in their particular area, but the process itself has benefits for the young people participating.

We identified key steps that supported co-production in the programme:

1. Setting expectations by asking local authorities and senior leaders to set out their commitment to co-production and involving young people from the beginning.
2. Young people's priorities – Work with young people to identify what is important to them through an authority wide survey (Your Life Beyond Care) and by follow up work to identify their priorities for action.
3. Working together to develop and deliver action plans with suggested changes.
4. Continuously sharing progress with staff, young people and others.
5. Staff and young people jointly reviewing progress and developing further plans.

It was also important to embed evaluation to understand what difference changes made. The programme evaluation<sup>16</sup> found improvements achieved at the local authority level included:

- Increased funding for the leaving care service
- Improved relational practice and connectivity
- Additional opportunities and resources for care leavers
- A greater focus on suitable and affordable accommodation
- Greater awareness of young people's needs and views through their direct contribution
- Increased co-production with young people

## Further developments

The Bright Spots surveys currently focus solely on children in care and care leavers. Since the initial pilots with a small number of local authority partners they have been used by over nearly 80 local authorities in England Scotland and Wales. We have extensive learning about what works in engaging children and young people, administering surveys and supporting local authorities to get the best response rates and work together (with children) on making change happen.

Participating local authorities who repeat the surveys, work with us to run them locally every two to three years to get an idea overview of how children and young people feel about their lives, benchmark their experiences against children in care in other local authorities and the general population.

Further work would be needed to create well-being measures for other groups of children supported by children's social care e.g. children in need; those receiving 'early help'. The Bright Spots surveys were co-produced with children in care and care leavers to capture the things that they felt made their lives good. There were many similarities with other groups of children but also distinct experiences that affected them – such as relationships with carers and social workers. Distinct projects would be needed to develop tools that are relevant for groups such as Children in Need, in kinship care or accessing early help. It would

---

<sup>16</sup> Ludvigsen, A & Taylor, S. (2022) New Belongings Programme: Final evaluation report, Coram  
<https://www.coram.org.uk/resource/resource-new-belongings-programme-final-evaluation-report-2022/>

also be beneficial to look at specific tools to use with groups that have alternative communication e.g. children with disabilities. Like the Bright Spots programme to date this should be developed in close partnership with the services who could use the tools and would support children and young people to complete them.

We encourage all local authorities to take action based on the findings, communicate with children and young people what they are doing and ideally use the findings to work with their children and young people to co-produce changes that would make their lives better. We have found variable practice in this regard, some areas find it easier than others to do this.<sup>17</sup>

Through the Bright Spots and New Belongings Programmes we found that local authorities really value having an external organisation ('critical friend' and facilitator for peer learning) supporting co-production and engagement and providing opportunities for peer learning was very positive.

To support the children's social care system to continue to share and apply best practice there should be a range of opportunities for local authorities to come together share ideas and discuss how to overcome the challenges that they experience; equivalent opportunities need to be available for young people's participation groups too.

## Recommendations

### Make listening a core mission

In addition to the missions identified to support children in care and care leavers, we recommend the introduction of a new distinct mission focused on consistently giving children and young people a voice in their own care and in the development of children's social care.

#### **Mission 7 – Voice**

*Mission 7: By 2027, all children and young people consistently report having a voice in their care, and there are structures to embed their right to be heard and enable their participation at all levels of decision making.*

This should include

- 1.) A range of opportunities for children and young people to have their voices heard at the individual, local authority and national level.
- 2.) Staff with the skills to communicate with and listen to children and young people and act on what they say or escalate issues to others who can.

---

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.education.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Evaluation-report-08.04.21.pdf><sup>18</sup>  
<https://coramvoice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Hull-Corporate-Parenting-Strat.pdf> There is more detail in the strategy of the different elements that go into achieving this goal.

- 3.) Individual care and pathway planning processes guided by children and young people such as child friendly plans or apps, supporting them to chair their reviews, decide where and when meetings take place etc.
- 4.) Mechanisms to ensure children are routinely informed about rights and have child friendly accessible sources of information about what support they are entitled to.
- 5.) Responsive systems where all children in care and care leavers are able to get hold of workers to discuss concerns and ask for help when needed and access independent advocacy to support them to have their voices heard.
- 6.) Systems to collate and aggregate issues that young people repeatedly raise in individual case work and are proving problematic in more than one local authority.
- 7.) Fun and engaging resources to encourage children and young people to participate and share their views.
- 8.) Child friendly complaints processes when things go wrong and cannot be resolved by workers directly.
- 9.) Participation structures such as Children in Care Councils with opportunities for children and young people to meet with senior leaders and share their views directly.
- 10.) Opportunities for children and young people to coproduce new projects and service developments.
- 11.) Senior leaders committed to listen to children and young people and embed co-production and communicate how they are responding to children and young people's views in an accessible format
- 12.) Regular scrutiny of the quality of participation with data collected on the effectiveness of participation and engagement.

More work is needed with both leaders and practitioners to identify the actions needed to embed youth voice but to realise this mission would include the following actions:

Leaders should

- Ensure that listening and acting on children and young people's views is valued and prioritised at all levels of decision making
- Ensure staff are skilled at communicating with, building trust and listening to children and young people about what is important to them and the changes they want to see.
- Ensure children in care and care leavers have access to information about their rights, advice and support to share their views on decisions about their care, including through advocacy services.
- Work with local partners (health, education, housing, Police, etc) to ensure that children's voices inform their work
- Gather feedback from children and young people about how they feel about their lives to inform decision making e.g. through surveys, care planning tools, advocacy services, participation groups, consultation and co-production projects.

- Resource participation including dedicated participation workers that coordinate children in care councils and care leaver forums with direct links to decision makers such as Corporate Parenting boards.

Practitioners should:

- Provide children with regular opportunities to share what is important to them, ask questions about their care and why decisions are made and inform decisions and plans.
- Involve children and young people in developing care and pathway plans and support them to chair their reviews
- Proactively offer children in care and care leavers advocacy services.

We would recommend further consultation with services and children and young people to finalise this list.

## Embed wellbeing

Make the overarching pillar/outcome for children in care and care leavers to promote the well-being of children in care and care leavers by providing the support they need to flourish and grow up to live full and successful adult lives. The wording used by Hull in their corporate parenting strategy encapsulates this:

“We want every child and young person in our care, and all of our care leavers, to achieve the best possible outcomes with the opportunities to enjoy life, be safe from harm and to have the support they need to help them be successful adults.” (Hull Corporate Parenting Strategy) <sup>18</sup>

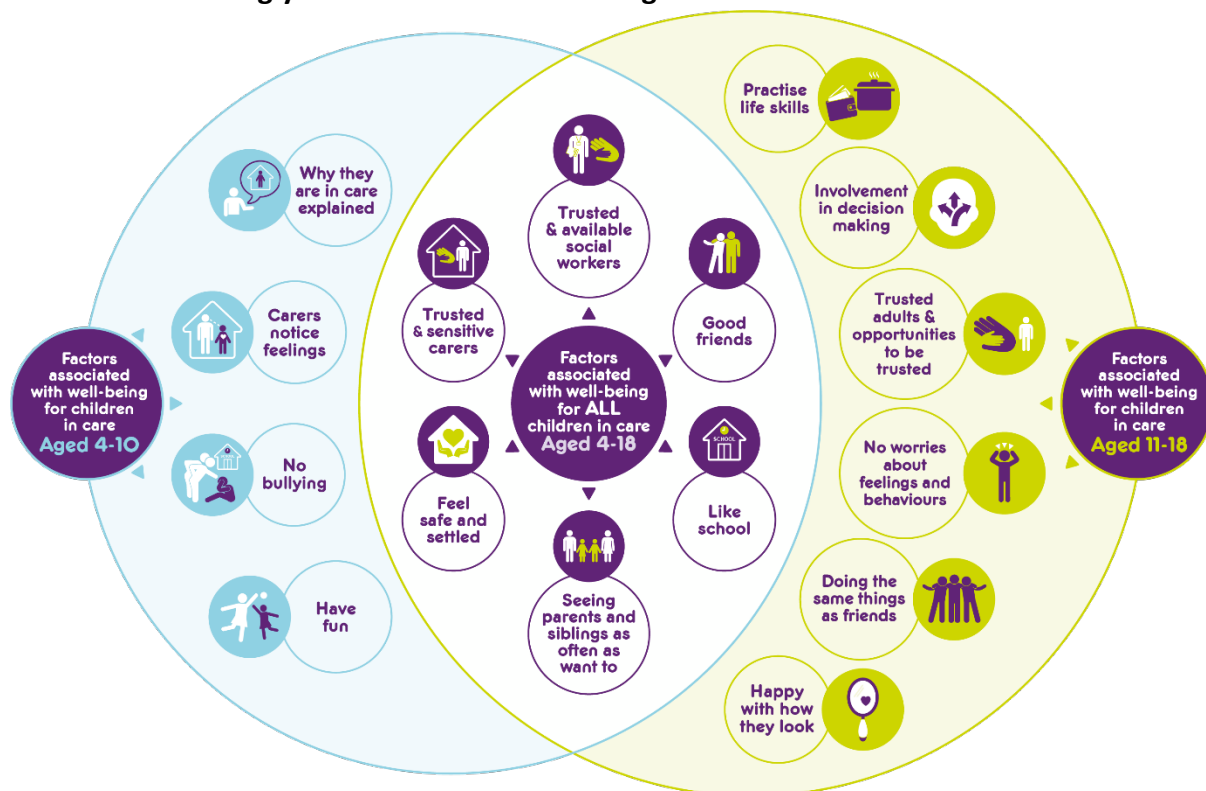
The definition of well-being used should be grounded in what children and young people say makes their lives good and children’s social care should focus on delivering these. Use the Bright Spots indicators to focus policy and practice <sup>19</sup> paying particular attention to the indicators that our research has found are most strongly associated with well-being (see diagrams below)

---

<sup>18</sup> <https://coramvoice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Hull-Corporate-Parenting-Strat.pdf> There is more detail in the strategy of the different elements that go into achieving this goal.

<sup>19</sup> For a full overview of the indicators see Voices Improving Care team (2020) *The Voices of Children In Care and Care Leavers on What Makes Life good: Recommendations for Reviewing the Care System*, Coram Voice & the Rees Centre at the University of Oxford

## Factors most strongly associated with well-being for children in care<sup>20</sup>

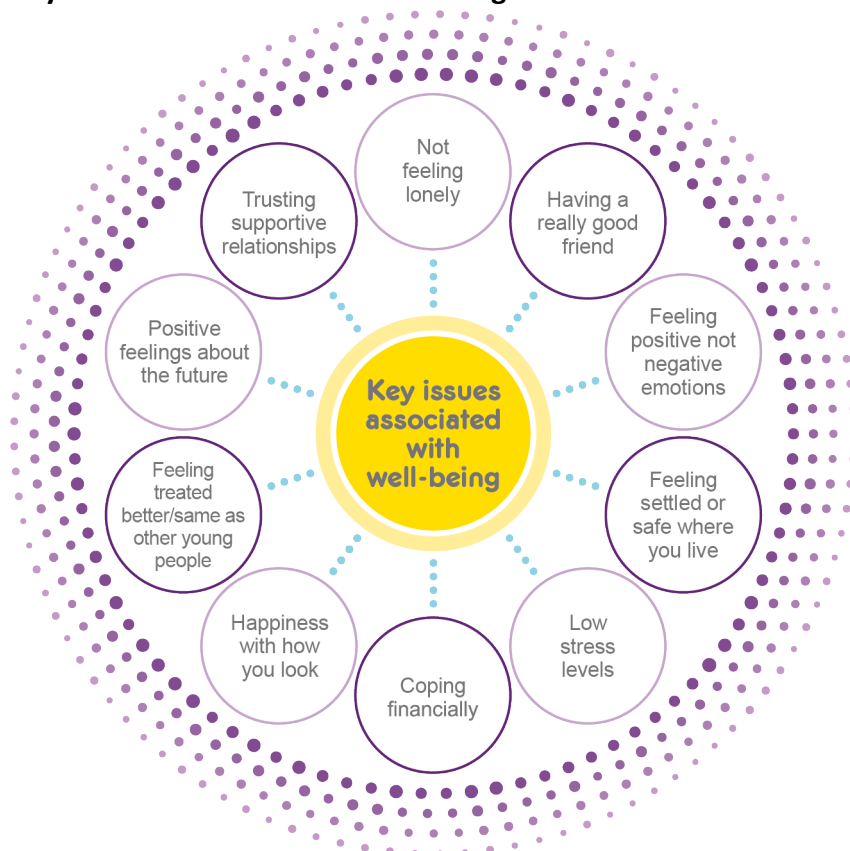


In relation to children in care services should make sure they have mechanisms for exploring and addressing with children in care whether they have:

1. Carers who they trust and who are sensitive to their feelings
2. Somewhere to live where they feel safe and settled
3. Social workers who don't change, are easy to contact and they trust
4. Opportunities to build and keep relationships with the people who are important
  1. to them (including family and friends)
5. Involvement in and information about their care and their families
6. Opportunities to be trusted and practise life skills as they get older
7. Fun in their free time and chances children to do similar things to their friends
8. Support to be free from bullying and to like school

<sup>20</sup> Selwyn, J & Briheim-Crookall, L (2022) 10,000 Voices: the views of children in care on their well-being, Coram Voice and Rees Centre, University of Oxford. <https://coramvoice.org.uk/for-professionals/bright-spots/resource-bank/10091/>

## Key issues associated with well-being for care leavers<sup>21</sup>



In relation to care leavers services should have mechanisms to focus on

- Improve connections and relationships (to develop friendships, trusting supportive relationships and addressing loneliness);
- Provide emotional and mental health support (to address stress, high negativity and low positivity and help care leavers feel good about themselves and their future);
- Provide money management and financial support (to support care leavers to cope financially);
- Improve accommodation support (to help care leavers feel safe and settled in their homes).

To enable for frequent reporting and real time data on well-being indicators some Bright Spots indicators have the potential to be embedded in direct work with children and young people and incorporated into case management systems. To identify these indicators a dedicated project with a small number of local authorities and partners (including young people) to explore how and which Bright Spots questions could be embedded in care planning and case management systems is needed. An aligned but separate project should look at how Bright Spots indicators could be embedded in national guidance, inspections

---

<sup>21</sup> Briheim-Crookall, L. *et al* (2020) *What Makes Life Good, Care leavers' Views on their Well-being*, Coram Voice & the Rees Centre, University of Oxford

and government strategy to encourage a greater focus on the things that children and young people say are important to their well-being.

## Advocacy for all

There should be a proactive offer of advocacy for all children and young people in contact with the children's social care system – each and everyone should have a right to be heard and should have information about their rights and access to independent advocacy to support them to have their voice heard. This should include all children in care and care leavers as well as children in child protection processes and children who may not come into care as they are supported to live with families or friends.

## Developing a system that continuously learns and improves

All local authorities should ensure they have mechanisms for capturing how their children in care feel about their lives in the areas that are important to them. They may be captured through the day-to-day conversations workers have with the young people they support, through effective participation groups or through gathering the views of children in care through local authority wide surveys.

To enable real learning outcomes indicators (as part of any National Framework) should not be looked at in isolation. Whilst metrics can helpfully point leaders/services in direction of things to explore further and respond to, without further detail they do not tell you how and what to do to address them. For example, if children and young people do not feel safe where they live is this disproportionately affecting particular groups (e.g. young people in supported accommodation or residential care); why do young people not feel safe and how do they feel they could best be supported to feel safer?

The National Framework should take the opportunity to use data that is already collected to get further insights into children and young people's experiences. There is significant scope to further analyse and explore the Bright Spots data set and use this on an ongoing basis to inform learning and development of the children's social care sector.

## Understanding current mechanisms to capture voice

To inform the development of a national framework and outcomes indicators work is needed to map how local authorities and national decision makers currently listen to and engage children and young people at the individual, organisational and systemic level. This should explore:

- When, where and with whom children and young people are asked to share their views?
- How their views and actions are recorded and shared with decision-makers and how children and young people learn what has happened as a result of sharing their view?
- What tools (template plans, apps, surveys, children in care councils etc) are used and how they are resourced?



- How care experienced young people were involved in developing current practice and any existing tools/mechanisms used?
- Are there any children and young people who cannot or do not engage with these existing mechanisms and what are the barriers to them doing so?
- How well the way the current practices address the different areas identified in the Lundy model?
- How current practices explore and relate to the issues that children and young people have said is important to their well-being (as identified by the Bright Spots programme)?

Further resources and development work is needed for both local authorities and the Department to engage with wider groups of young people who are not in care (early help, child protection, kinship care). This should start with mapping the extent to which local authorities currently work with these groups and what other organisations (such as charities) work with them and can involve and engage them. Dedicated projects to explore the best way to working which each group is needed as they are likely to have different experiences and services who support and engage them.

## Developing a structure to embed youth voice

Any recommendations from such a mapping exercise should be informed by care experienced young people themselves and should be reviewed by a group of care experienced young people to provide feedback on any tools or mechanisms that are proposed to be used nationally.

The way any outcomes measures are designed is very important. It is essential that ongoing consultation with children and young people is central to any outcomes indicators measuring youth voice that are developed.

A dedicated project to develop a proposed voice and influence structure for children's social care, considering involvement at the individual, operational and strategic level is needed. This should explore how the Lundy model can be applied to Children's social care in England, work with young people to identify a proposed model and the resources needed to implement it. It should identify how children and young people voices at different levels can be linked and inform each other and how the participation can be inclusive and engage all groups of children and young people who are supported by Children's Social care. This may involve new mechanisms in areas that are less developed such as early help and kinship care, and to reach specific groups that may be less heard. Learning from work in Ireland, who have pioneered much of this work, may helpfully inform this work. Specific consideration of the needs of specific groups who may be less heard because of their age, additional support needs (e.g. children with disabilities), where they live (e.g. out of area, prison, secure accommodation) or personal circumstances (e.g. young parents, UASC).

Children and young people should be involved in developing the new framework and identifying specific actions that practitioners and leaders should take. The Department should use the contracts they have commissioned to gather youth voice to review the

National Framework and discuss outcomes indicators with children and young people. They should use existing participation structures like Children in Care Councils to gather feedback from around the country.

## Senior leadership

The Government should create a ministerial post for children at cabinet level would be able to work across government departments to enable the welfare of children to remain a high priority, bringing the diverse strands of policy development together and giving a voice to the child's perspective.

### Contact details

To further discuss the content and recommendations in this paper please contact:

Linda Briheim-Crookall, Head of Policy and Practice Development  
[linda.briheim@coramvoice.org.uk](mailto:linda.briheim@coramvoice.org.uk)

Coram Voice  
Coram Campus  
41 Brunswick Square  
London WC1N 1AZ

[www.coramvoice.org.uk](http://www.coramvoice.org.uk)

© Coram Voice, May 2023