

Coram Voice response to the Stable homes, built on love strategy consultation

May 2023

Questions for Children and Young People

1 What difference do you think our 6 ambitions for change will make to the lives of children and families?

I think it's too soon to tell what difference they will make

What more, if anything, could make things better?:

Coram Voice hosts A National Voice, 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. 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. We discussed the strategy with Ambassadors in February and April this year and gathered their views on the ambitions. We have shared a paper pulling together their comments with DFE colleagues who also attended one of the sessions. Below is a summary of their feedback. The feedback is a record of the conversations that were had within the time we had to discuss the Strategy and should not be seen as an exhaustive list of feedback (as the group may not have had the opportunity to cover all the issues that were important to young people).

Ambition 1: Family Help

Key Messages: Young people thought that the emphasis on family help was positive and felt a range of support for families (both parents and children) was needed including mental health, addiction and parenting support. They felt workers need to balance the need to protect children with keeping them safely with their families. They thought that there should be senior oversight and scrutiny of those decisions and young voices supported to be heard through advocacy.

"Depending on the situation I think support needs to be given to the children not just the parents. Living with a parent with addiction is just as hard for the child as it is the parent. Make sure all party's get support. I do think sometimes young people get forgotten in situations like that. Also make sure an advocate is offered to help a young person, if wanted."

Ambition 2: Keeping children safe

Key messages: Keeping children safe was the top priority for our ambassadors. Their key messages included the importance of listening to the child, having highly trained professionals who can make well informed decisions and understand the context and identities of families (e.g. class, culture)

"In my case there were a lot of flags, I can see that now reading my files, but they were ignored. I think that it's important that professionals listen to children because if they did they might not miss things."

Ambition 3: Supporting families to help children

Key Messages: Young people emphasised that supporting the involvement of family and friends goes beyond providing a home for children and staying connected should be supported in a range of ways. Their comments highlight the overlap between Ambition 3 and Mission 1. In particular they emphasised how children need support to stay in touch with other children (friends, siblings) not just important adults.

"Contact should still be supported while you are in kinship care. Kinship carers still need money and help. When I was in kinship I didn't see my brother and then when I went back into foster care no one sorted this out and asked me about it. I am now 18 and haven't seen my brother for 12/14 years."

"When I went into care I only moved away an hour, which is very, very fortunate. I could have really seen my friend at any time, but they blocked me from seeing my friend. They did not allow me to have any contact with my old friends at all."

Ambition 4: Make care better for children in care and care leavers

Key messages: Although ANV Ambassadors welcomed some aspects of the plans in this Ambition, young people were unclear whether the proposed actions were ambitious enough and they questioned whether they will achieve real change for children. They were concerned whether adequate funding was there to implement changes and worried that inadequate resources could lead to the experience of the care system becoming worse, not better. Young people did not feel that the reforms focussed enough on mental health of children and young people and suggested that the proposal in the independent care review to make care experience a protected characteristic needed further consideration.

"I feel like with how the ambitions are at the moment and the work that they have put towards the ambitions it will do naff all to change anything. It's poorly funded...There's hardly any work getting put in by government, and it's probably going to be outsourced and then it'll probably get all confused in communication and we'll end up with a messier system. So, what I think will happen is either there'll be no change at all, or it will end up being negative change."

Ambition 5: Children have great social workers

Key Messages: Young people want stability of workers (regardless of whether they move 'teams' or their 'care status' changes), but the option to change social worker where there is a breakdown in the relationship. Workers should be available and see them regularly and have the skills to understand children and young people and build rapport.

"This [ambition] is really important. I think there is constant change and this needs to change, I think we should have 1 social workers for longer, maybe though out our [whole time in] care. However sometimes there is a clash of personality and it feels like social workers give up. They need to work on relationships harder as many of us have abandonment issues and this is just another blow when social workers give up. They need to push social workers to try harder so we can keep them."

Ambition 6: Improving the whole system for children and families

Key messages: Although young people support the ambition to improve the whole system they felt that more detail of changes are needed to have meaningful and consultation around what is proposed. They wanted to see changes implemented, not just discussed and had their own suggestions for changing services.

"Ambition 6 is a bit vague, what does it mean? It's good in its intention but it needs to have more detail."

2 If a friend told you they were having serious difficulties with their family at home and they wanted help, which trusted adult would you recommend they speak to?

Please comment below:

Not Applicable

3 Do you think the missions for children in care and care leavers are the right ones to focus on?

Don't know

Please comment below:

ANV ambassadors commented on the missions as well as the ambitions. They felt that there was a lack of focus on mental health and their feedback suggested a need for further consideration of the proposal in the independent care review to make care experience a protected characteristic.

Mission 1: Social workers and other practitioners make sure children and young people can see and spend time with the people who love and matter most to them

Key messages: The Ambassadors felt that resources are needed to support relationships. It should be a focus for both children in care and care leavers and include support to reconnect and maintain relationships with family and friends. Young people welcome the introduction of opt out independent advocacy for both children in care and care leavers.

"My family didn't have enough money to meet in public all the time, but that wasn't valued in the sense of, let's just do something that doesn't cost money. So yeah, financial [support is] helpful. But what about just actually valuing the time that young people need with their family?"

"They're talking about friends and family, but they're not doing anything to support the friends' side. But they want to support both sides of it and I'm a bit confused because I'm sat there and it's like, yeah, friends are just as important as family. I hated having to leave my best friend of like 7 years at the time, I'm back in contact with them which is awesome. But in any case, but that's a very happy ending for me, and I know a lot of people don't have that. So why are they talking about it but not doing anything about it at the same time?"

Young people welcomed the introduction of opt out independent advocacy for both children in care and care leavers.

"Advocacy should be an opt-out service so that they can give you confidence and self-esteem when going through the system. Adults that believe in you and hear your voice. This can help your mental health. With the right support you can have a good experience"

Mission 2: We want to have more people and organisations act like, or be, corporate parents.

Key messages: Young people felt a key part of organisations acting like a corporate parent was for these bodies to challenge stigma and discrimination. Young people talked about how, in their view, making care experience a protected characteristic could help provide protection against discrimination.

"They don't want to make being in care or having care experience a protected characteristic, but jobs have outright denied young people from, well, adults from care. Sorry, should just say. From working and I know this because I've had it myself. I'm under Universal Credit and obviously they've had me looking for jobs. And I have applied to a few and some that have gotten interview for have turned around and went because of your care experience we can't have you. So, they outright denied me because of that. This is why it needs to be a protected characteristic, so they can't do that."

Mission 3: We want to make sure there are enough good foster homes and children's homes for children to live in

Key messages: Young people felt more money was needed to increase choice and availability of homes (placements). They talked about both foster care and residential care. They felt a national recruitment campaign could help ensure consistency across the country and thought that it was important to address concerns prospective carers could have about the challenges of supporting children in care. They highlighted that care experienced carers would understand what children and young people are going through which could be a particular target group for recruitment campaigns.

"What's £3,000,000 really gonna do when foster care at the moment is in an abysmal state?"

"Maybe in the future I would like to be a foster carer because like I understand the situation and I thought I'd probably be better if someone was like under my care because I'd be like, yeah, I actually understand what you're going through and like, these are some ways to help and everything."

Mission 4: We want to make sure children in care are supported to do well in school or get good jobs, including older children aged 16 to 19 years old

Key messages: The ANV Ambassadors stressed that to support children and young people to do well and get good jobs you need to challenge stigma (see feedback around Mission 2) and celebrate their achievements. You should provide a range of opportunities including chances to get involved in influencing the care system through participation.

"We have awards for children in care in my LA. I think they should be national if they aren't already. It celebrates us and our achievements. There should be national awards as well. Maybe DfE could be involved and trainee social workers. It would highlight achievements and be something for us. It would bring care-experienced people together. It would help with stigma over time. This is something that can help future generations."

Mission 5: We will make sure more care leavers live in safe homes

Key messages: Young people agreed that feeling safe and settled is really important. This mirrors what young people have consistently highlighted through Coram Voice advocacy work and wider youth voice work (e.g. Bright Spots programme). Feeling safe was also a key priority for ANV ambassadors.

"I think it is really important that a young person feels settled, comfortable and welcome where they are living. Jargon within the care system has become all too familiar and sometimes people forget that having a home where you feel safe and settled can be one of the most important things in a young person's life. A home can be defined in many different ways depending on the young person and what they feel makes it their home."

Mission 6: We want to make sure adults working with children in care and care leavers know how to support them with their physical and mental health needs

Key messages: Young people felt that the strategy did not put enough emphasis on supporting the mental health of children and young people.

"Given that we [ANV ambassadors] did a whole campaign about mental health I'm a bit disappointed that they haven't really mentioned mental health. Because I've read the document in depth in the past, so having a great time...And it doesn't really come up other than kind of mentioning it in like conjunction with physical health, which is equally as important, but yeah, it feels like they should at least mention it..."

See also <https://coramvoice.org.uk/latest/a-national-voice-launch-support-our-journey-resource-pack/>

4 What makes, or would make a great social worker?

Please comment below:

Please see our previous report (Oct 2021) from young people collected as part of the A National Voice response to the Care Review for feedback from over 300 children and young people on these issues (p.14-15):

<https://coramvoice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/What-children-and-young-people-want-to-tell-the-care-review-report.pdf>

Young people have consistently told us that the best social workers are the ones that spend time with you, get to know you and explain what is happening. They also said Social worker changes can be difficult especially when they happen quickly or with no warning. When changes happen you have to start to trust a new person and tell them about your past which can be frustrating and unsettling. They said that when a new social worker has different opinions to the last social worker this can feel disorientating.

Our past report on this issue also emphasised the importance of training - this should include training for social workers (and others who work with children). Young people wanted them to have training in dealing with the bad things that may have happened to children and young people in the past (trauma informed) and mental health as well as understanding issues around identity 'what makes you, you' such as LGBTQ+, belief, culture. Training around understanding what it is like to be in care and how to listen was also important to the young people who shared their views. The report includes an overview of the key characteristics that young people feel that social workers should have and key messages for social workers from young people.

From the Bright Spots programme we have collected over 24,000 responses from children in care and care leavers since 2015. Through the programme young people consistently tell us that they want workers that they can 1.) trust, 2.) who don't change, 3.) involve them in decisions and 4.) are easy to contact.

5 If you were the Prime Minister, what would be the most important thing you would want to change in children's social care?

Please comment below:

Please see response from young people collected as part of the A National Voice response to the Care Review for feedback from over 300 children and young people on these issues:

<https://coramvoice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/What-children-and-young-people-want-to-tell-the-care-review-report.pdf>

We asked young people to identify 3 things to improve care. Here are their top things:

- Mental health, including tackling loneliness and making sure there are services available to help you.
- Training, for social workers and carers including around mental health, identity and cultural awareness, LGBTQ+, beliefs and religion. Training should include supporting you to understand your rights, entitlements, and why you are in care.
- Family time, how often you see your family and how this is valued.
- A fair care system, reduce the difference in care offered around the country.
- Listening and participation, to be listened to and not judged. To remove stigma and stereotypes. Being in care should be done with you not to you.
- Social workers, fewer changes in social workers. Better communication when changes take place and ensuring you are involved in decisions affecting you.
- Care leaver support, PAs [Personal Advisers] to support you with life skills to support (inter)dependence. You think that support shouldn't suddenly end at 25 and there should be support with employment, education and training.
- Financial support, reducing costs and developing budgeting skills, better and clearer financial packages for children and young people. Where possible for Local Authorities to reduce costs i.e. travel, council tax and housing costs. For all care leavers to receive budgeting skills.

6 What did you think of the children and young people's guide?

3 - OK

If you want to give further feedback, what could we do next time to make it better?:

Feedback from young people in our work is that they would like a range of materials to help them understand what is happening / proposed. Some find colourful materials with imagery important to help them take in information. Others have accessibility issues that makes a plain text version important. Some find reading a struggle and prefer recorded materials. Whilst there were videos produced by the Department they were very long which made them less accessible. We produced a short video guide that young people have found helpful <https://youtu.be/SQXp2B9h01M>

7 In the future, what do you think is the best way to ask children and young people what they think about our plans for children's social care?

Please comment below:

Whilst it is very positive that the Department is working with charities to gather children and young people's views and making some resources available to facilitate this, involving them sooner would have given more time for meaningful engagement and could have enabled them to reach a wider audience. Coram Voice is pleased to be working with the Department, but have only been able to do limited work with our network to inform the consultation closing on the 11 May, as contracts were not finalised in time. In the future, embedding youth voice and engagement in DFE structures, with ongoing resources to support this work, will help to do this consistently.

8 How old are you?

Not Answered

9 Are you:

Not Answered

Chapter 1: Our vision & making reform work for everyone

1 Overall, to what extent do you agree these six pillars are the right ones on which to base our reforms for children's social care?

Disagree

If desired, please briefly explain your answer :

Whilst we agree that the pillars are important areas for reform we would like to see a greater focus on (subjective) well-being.

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.

The Bright Spots programme developed by Coram Voice in partnership with Prof. Julie Selwyn (University of Oxford) provides a framework -a wealth of data and insight to help define what is important to care experienced young people.

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.

We feel that underlying all the pillars should be a principle of promoting well-being, not just avoiding negative outcomes. We should support children to safely stay with their families where it is best for their well-being, act swiftly when they need protection to support their well-being, live with relatives where this supports their well-being and provide them with stable loving homes as important foundation for well-being.

We remain concerned that the proposed reforms and resources allocated to support them will not be sufficient to achieve the aspirations set out in the strategy. Achieving change will require significant financial investment as outlined by the MacAlistair review.

2 What more can be done by government, local authorities and service providers to make sure that disabled children and young people can access the right types of help and support?

Please comment below:

As with all groups of children and young people a focus on well-being and flourishing should underpin the help and support for disabled young people in contact with children's social care.

As recent reports into abuse of disabled children in residential care have shown, listening to children and young people is essential. We endorse the findings of the Phase 2 Report - Safeguarding children with disabilities and complex health needs in residential settings that recommends:

"All children with disabilities and complex health needs in residential settings should have access to independently commissioned, non-instructed advocacy from advocates with specialist training to safeguard the children and respond to their communication and other needs."

Visiting advocacy in residential settings and a proactive offer to young people will be important. Children and young people do not need to be verbal to be heard. All disabled children should have access to opt out independent advocacy with professionals trained in communicating with them including non-instructed advocacy (https://coramvoice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/non_instructed_advocacy_leaflet.pdf) . National advocacy standards need to be strengthened around guidance for visiting advocacy. Visits need to be frequent enough to build relationships with children and understand the culture of an institution. It needs to be clear who has the responsibility to commission these services to ensure advocacy is independent. It is vital that advocacy services have clear and robust safeguarding escalation processes.

To be able to understand the experience of disabled young people case management systems will need to be able to identify children and young people who have disabilities and this data used to interrogate differential outcomes. Only then will it be possible to use evidence and data to learn about how their experiences differ from other children and gather evidence around the extent to which services are able to meet their needs. More work is needed to understand the barriers experienced by different groups of disabled children and young people, this can only be started if we can understand differences – e.g. are educational outcomes particularly poor for certain groups of disabled children?

We know from our Bright Spots work that care leavers who report that they have a disability or long term health condition have lower well-being than other care leavers. More work is needed to understand the well-being of disabled children and young people in the care system. Existing measures like the Bright Spots surveys, whilst relevant to some children and young people with disabilities cannot be used by all, such as those that are non-verbal. Further work is needed to develop measures to effectively capture what disabled young people feel are important to their well-being, including whether they have trusting and supportive relationships with the key people in their lives.

We would also like to reiterate the recommendations we made in our response to the Care Review's Case for Change. Particular issues relating to children in care and care leavers with disabilities that it are important to address 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.

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 (this is separate from and in addition to any visiting advocacy for children in residential settings), especially as they may not be in a position to request advocacy support themselves. We know through the work of the Always Heard Advice Line 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.

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 the strategy highlights mental health 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. In addition, emotional wellbeing as a key driver of positive outcomes for children and young people, ways to promote positive well-being should be considered as a key area in care planning for children in care and pathway planning for care leavers.

Chapter 2: Family Help

1 To what extent are you supportive of the proposal for a system that brings together targeted early help and child in need, into a single, Family Help Service in local areas?

Don't know

If desired, please briefly explain your answer :

As a charity representing the voice of the child, we know that regardless of how services are structured, the important thing will be whether children and young people have the opportunity to be heard independently from their families. They should also be supported to understand what is happening and why families are being supported.

It will also be important that any evaluation of the new pilots involves gathering children and young people's experiences of the new services and whether they are better able to support children and young people's well-being. Any evaluation should focus on the aspects that children and young people themselves feel are important. General work on children and young people's well-being as well as more specific work into the well-being of children in care developed under the Bright Spots programme can inform this, but we recommend the development of specific outcomes measures co-produced by the children and young people who would be affected. It would be useful to set up longitudinal work to explore the long term outcomes for children and young people.

2 Looking at the features of early help listed below, in your opinion or experience, what are the top 3 features that make it a supportive service for families?

FH2 - The service is designed together with the input of children and families:

1

FH2 - It is based in local communities, and sits alongside other services such as education, libraries, citizen's advice services and housing services:

FH2 - Information and support are available and can be accessed online:

FH2 - Information and support are available and can be accessed in person:

FH2 - Early help is delivered by voluntary and community sector as well as the local authority and their partners (police and health):

FH2 - Strong relationship with one key worker/lead individual for every family:

2

FH2 - Having people with the right knowledge and skills available to help when needed:

FH2 - Having people with the right experience available to help when needed:

FH2 - Being able to access the right type of support:

FH2 - Other (please specify):

3

If you selected "other", please describe the feature which you think makes early help supportive for families:

Co-designing services with families and young people is essential. It will be important to make sure that children have a say in their own right and not just through parents. Children and young people need to be provided with advocacy support and information about their rights and entitlements in order to make informed choices.

Chapter 3: Parental Representation in Child Protection

1 Have you ever provided or received parental representation during the child protection process?

Other.

If you selected "other", please briefly describe how you have received or provided a form of parental representation during the child protection process.: My organisation advocates for children in child protection processes. We also provide advocacy for care leavers who are parents.

2 If you have had experience with a form of parental representation in the child protection process, please tell us about it.

Please describe your experience of a form of parental representation. In answering, please do not provide any personal details about the child protection case you were involved with. :

Coram Voice has developed and delivered a highly successful "opt out" Child Protection Advocacy service model. This model has shown that when advocacy is offered proactively in child protection up to 97% of children take it up. We also have a wealth of experience in supporting children across the country who are involved in the child protection process through our advocacy contracts for all children supported by children's services.

Our child protection advocacy service usually operates by referrals made directly by the authority to Coram Voice for every initial CPC and CP review. Children referred for CP advocacy will normally be allocated an advocate within 48 hours.

The advocate will then make contact with the child through the child's parent, obtaining parental consent to advocacy in the process. The advocate will then explain their role to the child and if the child wishes to have an advocate during the process will make arrangements to meet the child (often at school or another safe place that the child is comfortable in) before the meeting to establish what support they need conference, and to ascertain their wishes and feelings.

The advocate will then accompany the young person to the conference, or attend on their behalf to ensure that the young person's wishes and feelings are properly heard and taken into account by the meeting. The advocate will spend time with the child after the conference or review to ensure they have understood what took place.

This process will then be repeated for further review(s) with the advocate picking up and taking forward any issues or complaints that arise. This relationship will end when the child feels they no longer need advocacy support or are no longer involved in the Child Protection process. It is child led.

In total the advocate meets with the child prior to the conference and then in the conference and for debriefing after the conference, and subsequent Review as appropriate.

The child protection process can be distressing for children and Coram Voice advocates are trained in techniques such as active listening skills to ascertain the child's wishes at a time when the child may be extremely anxious or separated from their family. It will be explained that the child may decide whether they wish to attend the conference (or part of it). An important part of the advocates role is also explaining the process and purpose of the child protection conference and reviews to children and young people. This means that children are prepared for the meeting and understand what may happen as a result. This provision of information is also vital after any initial conference or review.

The advocate will support the child to express their own views at the conference or represent their views on their behalf. The advocate will meet the child after the conference to feedback and arrange to see them prior to the review conference, repeating the process until the 'case' is closed or the child no longer wants advocacy support. Advocacy may continue to support the child at Children In Need Reviews or Looked After Reviews if the child moves into a care situation, the 'case' would then be re-allocated as community advocacy.

We also offer advocacy to care leavers. Care leavers can be more likely to have their children referred to child protection processes, with some areas regarding care status in itself as a risk factor. This is discriminatory and would be an important factor to be considered in any extension of corporate parenting duties or care experience as a protected characteristic. They often find that when they have a child, although the state is their corporate parent, attention shifts to the child and sometimes support for the young person is inadequate. Barnardo's recent report by care experienced parents provide insight into their experience <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/care-experienced-parents-unite-change>. Advocacy has an important role to play in challenging any institutional bias towards care leavers, it can also provide a safeguard and build trust where care leavers are worried about turning to services for help because they feel that their children may be removed. See this article from our Care Experienced Consultant Lauren Parker to understand some of these concerns <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>

Whilst the strategy suggests that, "Parents are supported and given the right information at the right time, so they have the best possible chance to engage actively with child protection processes." This need for right information at the right time is equally true for children. There is no mention of how children and young people will be supported to be informed and heard. Having advocacy for children in child protection is a very important part of safeguarding. It provides children with an independent person to speak to at a very terrifying and fraught time. Advocacy for children in Child protection is an important check and balance and at it's core, is child led and child controlled.

As the guidance for advocacy and child protection sets out, independent advocacy for children in child protection is essential as it:

- a) Empowers children who are going through very difficult times
- b) Safeguards children within child protection procedures and actions
- c) Ensures a fuller picture emerges of the child's life, wishes and concerns and therefore a more credible assessment of their best interests
- d) Increases the child's engagement in child protection processes and outcomes
- e) Provides the child with an additional trusted mechanism for raising concerns
- f) Ensures the child remains everyone's focus

- g) Increases parents' engagement in child protection processes and outcomes
- h) Brings about wider changes in policy and practice
- i) Helps local authorities demonstrate compliance with domestic and international law.

This and more detail and information about how to commission advocacy for children in child protection is in:

https://www.childsafeguardingtoolkit.org.uk/static/principles-files/independent_advocacy_in_child_protection_-_guidance_for_policy_makers.pdf

We therefore believe that alongside any parental advocacy, child protection advocacy should be an opt-out service for the child and young person (with parental consent). We are concerned that the child could be more isolated if there is more voice for parents without independent advocacy available to children to support them to have their voices heard. Therefore, all children should get a proactive offer to advocacy, be referred to get an independent introduction to advocacy (by the advocacy service rather than the social worker) and then they have the choice of whether they use it.

Advocacy should be available to any care leaver or child in care who is a parent going through child protection processes.

3 If you are happy to or would prefer to talk to us further about your experience with a form of parental representation in child protection processes, please indicate your consent to be contacted in relation to this set of questions only.

Yes

Please enter email address here:

Andrew.dickie@coramvoice.org.uk

Chapter 4: Unlocking the potential of Family Networks

1 In your view, how can we make a success of embedding a "family first" culture in children's social care?

Please comment below:

Our Bright Spots research shows that family is really important to well-being. Whilst not without their challenges our research has found that kinship foster care placements support relationships (see <https://coramvoice.org.uk/for-professionals/bright-spots/resource-bank/the-views-of-children-and-young-people-in-kinship-foster-care-on-their-well-being/>) and that staying connected to family and friends (including extended family) is really important to children's well-being. (see <https://coramvoice.org.uk/for-professionals/bright-spots/resource-bank/staying-connected/>)

This work, unlocking the potential of families, should start with the child and services should work with all children to identify the key relationships in their lives both before and whilst in care and listen to and involve children and young people in decisions about the arrangements of who they live with and how they get to see and keep in touch with family and others who are important to them. It will be important that children and young people have opportunities to be heard if arrangements are not working for them. Access to advocacy would be important part of this framework as well as clarity about who to turn to if there are issues. An active offer of advocacy should be made to children as part of the initial decision making process and advocacy available if issues arise at a later date, with scope to explore other options.

It will be important to consider cultural and personal differences as to who is family. In our Staying Connected research young people identified a whole range of different people who were important to them who were not necessarily blood related. Proposals must avoid a Eurocentric view of family and focus on family as defined by the child/young person.

The remit of local authority advocacy services and the Always Heard – the national advocacy Advice Line for children in care and care leavers should be extended to children in kinship care whether they are looked after or not.

The availability of practical and financial support, including help with housing, will be important as children and young people even in related (kinship) foster care report issues with overcrowding and financial struggles for carers. Whilst many children in kinship foster care felt more satisfied with how often they saw their parents and siblings there were reports of challenges where they had unwanted contact. There should be support for families to manage contact where needed. If children are in care, contact plans should be reviewed regularly with children and young people and make sure they know where to turn if they are unhappy with how often they are seeing key people in their lives, including having access to advocacy.

A family first approach should be focused on how children can be supported to live with family and friends, but it should also include consideration about how else families and friends can be supported to play an ongoing role in the child's life.

Nowhere is this more evident than in children's relationship with their siblings. The lack of support children in care and care leavers experience in this area has been repeatedly emphasised by the children and young people we work with through the Bright Spots programme, our advocacy work, A National Voice and consultations with children in care councils.

In the strategy there is not enough emphasis on staying connected with siblings (when sisters and brothers don't live together). Local authorities, social workers and carers and this implementation strategy all need to prioritise this more. Where family members may not be able to look after children full time, ways in which they can still play a role in children's lives should not be lost, assessments should inform these plans, e.g. grandparents having children regularly for sleepovers, best friend's dad taking them to football practice, aunty and uncle taking siblings for a day out together.

In the discussions we have had with local authorities about how to support children to stay connected with families it is clear that considerations of risk influences decisions. Understanding and considering this will be important to design the support to help families stay together.

The recommendations from our two recent research reports are important to embedding a family culture and these principles should guide this work:

1. 10,000 Voices insight paper – The views of children and young people in kinship foster care on their well-being

- Try to make sure that a child's first placement is their only placement by searching for and assessing relatives or friends as quickly as possible
- Make sure that every child knows who their social worker is, how to contact them and that social workers visit regularly and see children on their own.
- Ensure children and young people have an age-appropriate understanding of why they are living with a kinship carer and support carers around how to talk sensitively to children about their past and the reasons why they are not living with their parents.
- Review contact plans regularly with children and young people and make sure they know where to turn if they are unhappy with how often they are seeing key people in their lives
- Talk to children about how they feel about their homes and bedrooms and explore creative solutions to make things better if they are unhappy, e.g. funding space saving furniture.
- Support kinship carers with income maximisation and ensure they receive all the benefits and allowances they are entitled to.
- Work with the kinship carer(s) and the family network to create a plan for the child's care in case the kinship carer became unable to continue care, reassuring children that adults have planned and will keep them safe
- Work with schools so that children and staff become more aware of the needs of children in different types of care and consider how they can support children in kinship care with bullying.

2. Staying Connected (Key Findings and Recommendations): The views of looked after children and young people on their contact arrangements:

- Work with all children to identify the key relationships in their lives.
- Make arrangements for children and young people to maintain contact, develop relationships and reconnect with people who are important to them.
- Listen to and involve children and young people in decisions about the arrangements to see and keep in touch with family and others who are important to them.
- Keep children in care informed about their families, why they can or cannot see them, and what arrangements have been made for them to spend time together.
- Ensure plans are regularly reviewed and reflect the current circumstances, wishes and needs of children and young people and their families.
- Normalise family time whenever possible, minimising the use of contact centres and supporting children and families to meet in the community.
- Make sure the workforce has the skills and knowledge to prioritise and confidently support children in care to stay connected to the people who are important to them.

Decision-making for children needs to consider long term support; if children move to informal kinship arrangements (i.e. they are no longer looked after) this will impact on the support they receive both during childhood and as an adult. We are concerned about whether the driver is to reduce numbers of children in care or make the best arrangements for the child. Children should not be disadvantaged and lose entitlements to support that they would otherwise have had in these arrangements, without being able to make informed decisions about arrangements (e.g. support post 18 that care leavers would be entitled to).

It is unclear how the strategy differs from existing guidance that states "Where a child cannot remain living with his or her parents, the local authority should identify and prioritise suitable family and friends placements, if appropriate. Where possible, this identification should take place before care proceedings are issued, as it may avoid the need for proceedings".

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/306282/Statutory_guidance_on_court_orders_and_pre-proceedings.pdf

2 In your view, what would be the most helpful forms of support that could be provided to a family network, to enable them to step in to provide care for a child?

Please comment below:

Children and their families must be given clear information about the rights and entitlements and implications of being in care as opposed to outside the care system. Lack of information or skewed information impacts on access to services.

It is essential that children and young people's wishes and feelings are central to decision making processes. An active offer of advocacy should be made to children as part of the initial decision making process and advocacy available if issues arise at a later date, with scope to explore other options.

3 What support does your local authority provide to Special Guardians or to a non-parental party with a Child Arrangements Order?

FN1 - A means tested financial allowance:

FN1 - A non-means tested financial allowance:

FN1 - Access to training:

FN1 - Access to free legal advice:

FN1 - Access to information about becoming a kinship carer:

FN1 - Don't know:

Special Guardian, Child Arrangements Order

FN1 - Other (please specify below):

If you selected "other", please describe the type of support here:

4 To what extent are you supportive of the working definition of kinship care?

Don't know

If desired, please briefly explain your answer :

n/a

Chapter 5: The Care Experience

1 Overall, to what extent do you agree that the 6 key missions the right ones to address the challenges in the system?

Neither agree or disagree

If desired, please briefly explain your answer :

Whilst we agree that the Strategy paper's pillars and the National Framework's Outcomes & Enablers are important areas for reform, we would like to see 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, are safe and supported to flourish and grow up to live full and successful adult lives. To do this 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 the national framework and proposed indicators not aligning. 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.

We recommend that 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 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, paying particular attention to the indicators that our research has found are most strongly associated with well-being. (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)

In addition to the missions identified to support children in care and care leavers, we would like a 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. 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 it a reality.

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.

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

Below is an initial outline of this proposed new mission:

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.
- 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 and children 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.

For more details about these proposal see our paper 'Embedding youth voice in children's social care' that we have submitted alongside this response.

2 To what extent do you agree or disagree that a care experienced person would want to be able to form a lifelong legal bond with another person?

Don't know

3 What would you see as the advantages or disadvantages of formally recognising a lifelong bond in law?

Please comment below :

There is not enough detail in the strategy paper about how a lifelong bond would operate or what it could achieve to form an informed view or consult with young people about this. An analysis of the implications (e.g. legal, financial etc) along with tangible examples of what it may look like in practice would be needed to form a view.

4 What support is needed to set up and make a success of Regional Care Cooperatives?

Please comment below:

An important aspect of local authority commissioning is that it can be informed by young people (who now and use those services and have local knowledge) through the participation structures such as children in care councils and projects to involve and engage young people. For example, the Isle of Wight involved care leavers in commissioning new supported accommodation (see <https://coramvoice.org.uk/for-professionals/bright-spots/resource-bank/care-leavers-commissioning-new-supported-living-accommodation/>) in others they have had a role in inspecting services.

When setting up Regional Care Cooperatives it will be important to identify how the voice of the child will inform their work and how can they work in partnership with local and regional participation structures to engage children and young people in their work.

5 Do you have any additional suggestions on improving planning, commissioning and boosting the available number of places to live for children in care?

Please comment below:

n/a

6 Are there changes you think would be helpful to make to the existing corporate parenting principles?

Please comment below:

As indicated in the feedback we gathered from children and young people above, a greater emphasis on tackling stigma and discrimination would be helpful. We would also like to see a range of public bodies gaining a better understanding of the experience of children in care and care leavers. This should, in turn, be linked to a responsibility to consider the potential impact of different policies and practices on children and young people and how they can be 'care proofed' – by making sure they do not disadvantage care experienced children and young people. When developing policy and practice in the care system, the key question should be - will children in care and care leavers feel that their lives got better as a result? Young people need to trust those who care for them to be there for them when they need it. Being a care leaver should benefit, rather than disadvantage young people. The state should aspire to give care leavers the same opportunities and experiences as other young people. This should be reflected in the Corporate Parenting Principles.

The principles should align with the missions and ambitions for the care system. In particular there should be a commitment to supporting children to keep and develop trusting and supportive relationships with the people who are important to them. We endorse the principles and approach taken by Hull in their corporate parenting strategy (<https://coramvoice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Hull-Corporate-Parenting-Strat.pdf>). This includes their overarching vision statement: "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."

We would also like to see a commitment in corporate parenting principles to remove cliff edges (age-led cliff edges / service criteria cliff edges) in care and ensure that the support mirrors parenting by being guided by 'stage not age'. This should include ongoing support into adulthood as set out in North Yorkshire's Always Here offer highlighted in the Independent Care Review.

7 Which bodies, organisations or sectors do you think should be in scope for the extension of the corporate parenting principles – and why?

Please comment below:

Duties on Health and Education partners will be essential as these are key partners in supporting children and young people to do well and flourish. However, as demonstrated in Scotland most public bodies can have a role in supporting children in care and care leavers and they should all be encompassed by the principles.

We feel that it will also be important to further explore complementing the Corporate Parenting Principles with an extension of Care as a protected characteristic. In a recent report by NYAS and Coram Voice, shared with the Department, 60% of the care experienced respondents supported the introduction of this idea, some were still unsure and wanted more information, whilst 11% did not favour this. It is clear from the feedback from ANV ambassadors that there is a need to challenge the stigma and discrimination that care experienced young people experience in employment. This may not be covered by the extension of corporate parenting principles and equalities legislation may be a better way to tackle this. We recommend that the Department does further work to set out the benefits and challenges associated with introducing a protected characteristic, enacts the further consultation suggested by the MacAlister review, and supports local authorities who have already adopted this position to take a consistent approach to implementation and share learning and impact.

8 Do you have any further feedback on the proposals made in the 6 missions of this chapter?

Please comment below:

The mission capture several important areas of work to address. Based on feedback from children and young people two particular omissions in the strategy stand out

Mission 1 – Relationships

The Bright Spots programme has gathered over 24,000 care experienced voices on what makes life good for them. The first Mission does focus on a central aspect of children's well-being – relationships. This is very positive. Whilst access to initiatives such as family finding, Independent Visitors, Mentoring and Befriending programmes are important, the strategy does not go far enough in encouraging the practice that will support children to build and keep relationships with their peers (including friends and siblings). The strategy appears to suggest that providing more local placements will ensure that children in care maintain these bonds. Whilst staying local can support children to maintain relationships, adults must actively prioritise giving them the opportunities to keep and build relationships. The care system needs to consider how processes and decisions impact on friendships, from a teenager not being allowed a mobile phone, to a younger child not having someone arrange play dates with their best friend.

Mission 6 – mental health

This mission feels weaker than all the other missions, in that it is the only one that does not set a specific timeframe for action. There was a thorough review of how to improve the mental health and well-being of looked after children, yet many of its recommendations have not been implemented (see report of the Expert Working group <https://www.scie.org.uk/children/care/mental-health>)

Urgent action is needed to make sure that young people can access mental health support when and where they need it. Young people have told us this is their number one priority.

The proposed drivers to engage health recommended by the MacAlister review seem to have been diluted. There was an opportunity to go further and commit to establishing mental health leads in all looked after children and leaving care services; providing psychological wellbeing services and counselling services for all young people and care leavers, Mental Health First Aid training for workers (PAs, IVs, advocates) that were highlighted in the Care review report. We encourage the Department to go further in this domain to address this crucial issue.

Chapter 6: Workforce

1 Overall, to what extent do you agree that our proposals on the social worker workforce address the challenges in the system?

Don't know

2 If you want the proposals to go further, what would be your top priority for longer term reform?

Please comment below:

We support the aim of trusted and available social workers for every child. Young people have clearly told us that they want workers to spend time with them to get to know them and build trust.

The focus skills development and recruitment in the strategy offers an opportunity to embed a greater focus on the voice of the child. The DFE should involve children and young people in developing the Early careers framework and training for social care professionals. As part of the implementation strategy they should ensure that the issues that children and young people feel are important are focused on and care experienced young people should be invited to co-produce and co-deliver training and training materials for workers. They should also inform strategies to recruit new workers – young people's panels should become the norm and young people should have opportunities to inform job descriptions and key competencies that new staff are expected to have. There are examples of these initiatives on a local level that should be consistently applied when developing national policy (for example see Dudley dear social worker <https://youtu.be/6XJ7LEbiwfs>; Hertfordshire's Top Ten Tips for Workers <https://coramvoice.org.uk/for-professionals/bright-spots/resource-bank/top-ten-tips-for-workers/> and Hull's dream on video <https://coramvoice.org.uk/for-professionals/bright-spots/resource-bank/dream-on/>)

The department should direct the organisation who develops the Early careers framework to map existing initiatives and use existing resources in their work. It will be important to explain how the work developed applies to other professionals such as Personal Advisers who support care leavers.

Chapter 7: System Enablers

1 Beyond the proposals set out in this chapter, what would help ensure we have a children's social care system that continues to share and apply best practice, so that it learns from and improves itself?

Please comment below:

Data should be used to make good decisions, highlight where action may need to be taken. They should be interrogated thoughtfully, exploring whether particular issues affect certain groups of children and young people more than others. 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 responses to the survey to look for particular issues that children and young people experience locally are examples of this.

The current measures proposed in the national framework are primarily process measures rather than outcomes measures. The Department should be mindful that focusing on performance measures risks skewing practice and driving undue focus on changing particular metrics rather than understanding the complexity of children's experiences and informing learning about how it can be improved.

Through the Bright Spots and New Belongings Programmes we found that having an external organisation supporting co-production and engagement and providing opportunities for peer learning was very positive. To support the 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.

We believe that leaders should be accountable to children and young people themselves, there are existing examples of this e.g. Sheffield's scrutiny panel: <https://coramvoice.org.uk/for-professionals/bright-spots/resource-bank/sheffield-young-peoples-scrutiny-panel/>; Hull's Corporate Parenting strategy informed by what is important to young people <https://coramvoice.org.uk/for-professionals/bright-spots/resource-bank/childrens-voice-shaping-policy-and-practice/>.

Chapter 8: Delivery

1 In your opinion, how can we ensure the delivery of reform is successful?

Please comment below:

It will be essential that the system is resourced properly to enable it to implement any reforms including adequate funding for all different proposals. In addition, placing children and young people's voice at the heart of the reform programme and being more explicit about the actions to ensure youth voice rather than just referring to these as core principles. For more details about these proposals see our paper 'Embedding youth voice in children's social care' (in which we propose a new mission on hearing and responding to youth voice) that we have submitted alongside this response.

Impact Assessments (Equalities and Child Rights)

1 Do you have any overall comments about the potential impact, whether positive or negative, of our proposed changes on those who share protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 that we have not identified?

Please comment below:

The provision of a full equalities impact assessment is positive, but we note that the duty in relation to age does not extend to education or children's homes due to exceptions in the Equality Act 2010.

The specific consideration of teenagers is welcome, and more of this is needed beyond the conversation around protected characteristics e.g. differential

treatment and protections for children aged 16-17 living in supported accommodation.

Similarly, proposals to reduce racial disparities are positive but differential treatment of migrant children risks completely undermining other initiatives. This differential treatment is on course to be hugely exacerbated by measures in Clauses 15-20 of the Illegal Migration Bill, which establish a competing set of legal duties for local authorities to comply with alongside their existing duties under the Children Act 1989 and erodes unaccompanied asylum-seeking children's access to the care system as we know it.

The clauses will confer broad retrospective powers on the Home Secretary to provide accommodation for 'looked after'/unaccompanied children as well as the projected power to terminate a child's 'looked after' care status and so the key legal protections provided by local authorities to these migrant children. These measures directly undermine work by the Department for Education's ability to implement positive measures in the Independent Review.

Along with our colleagues in the Coram Group, Coram Voice, supports the extension of corporate parenting duty across public bodies as helpful in addressing stigma and discrimination and we propose that a voluntary code to encourage public bodies and other organisations to treat care-experience as a protected characteristic when developing policy and practice might provide evidence and help inform further consultation on embedding this principle in practice and legislation.

We also note, however, that it is unclear how this extended – or indeed the existing – corporate parenting duty would sit alongside the Home Office's proposed new role in being the direct accommodation provider for migrant and refugee children once it has terminated their care status.

2 Do you have any overall comments about the potential impact, whether positive or negative, of our proposed changes on children's rights?

Please comment below:

There is not a full child rights impact assessment accompanying this strategy. This should be completed by the Department in relation to each policy proposal as it is implemented.

Evaluation of this consultation

1 Please help us to improve our consultations by answering the question below (responses to this question will not be published)

EV1 - How satisfied were you with this consultation:

Neither dissatisfied or satisfied

Please provide any further feedback you may have:

We look forward to working with the Department to engage Children and young people's in the development of implementation plans. Unfortunately delays in procurement has not allowed us to support the Department to consult widely with our network of children in care councils and other participation groups. Setting up structures to capture youth voice as proposed in the paper we have prepared to accompany this response will help the Department to do such work in a more timely manner going forward.