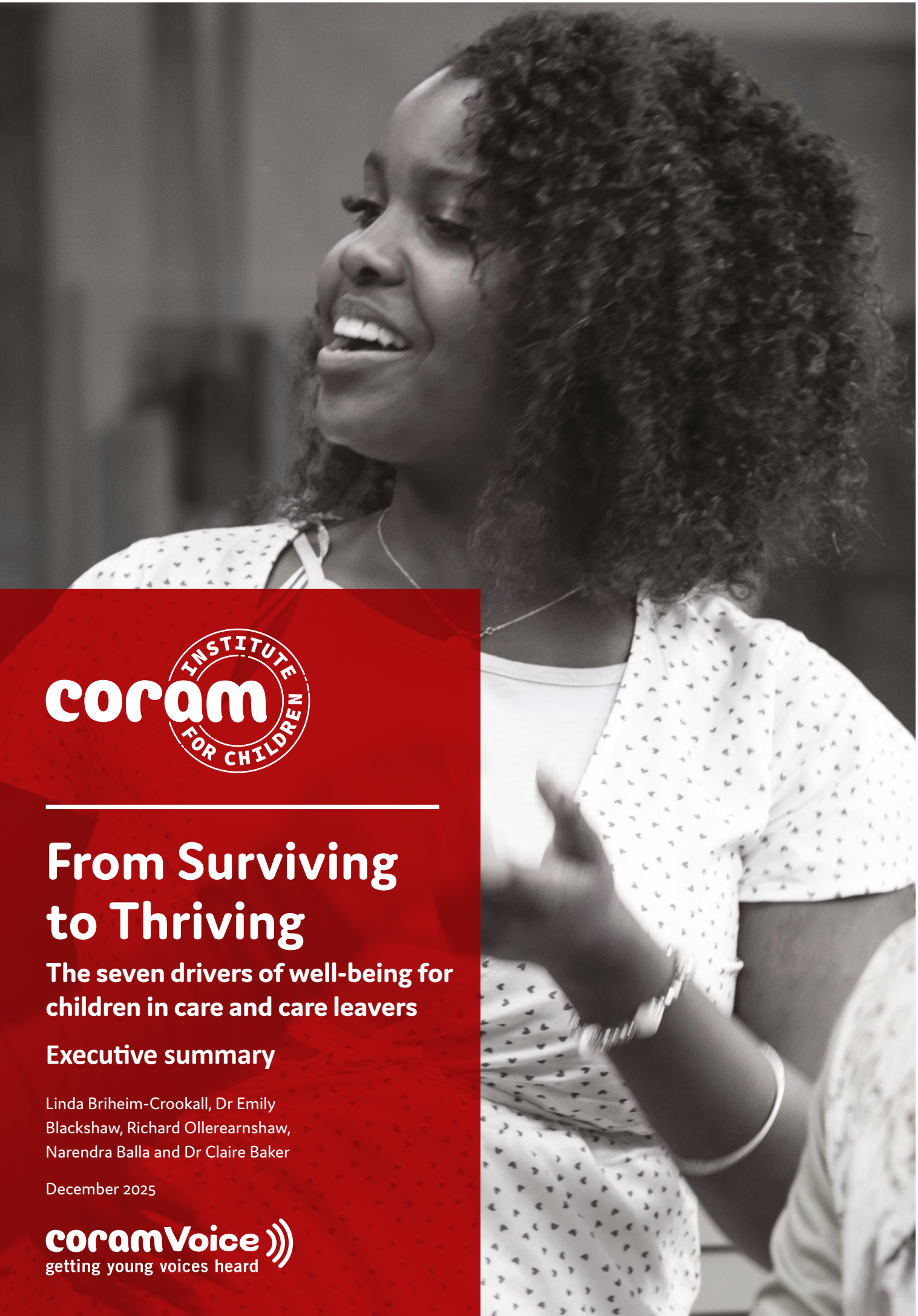

coram INSTITUTE FOR CHILDREN

From Surviving to Thriving

The seven drivers of well-being for children in care and care leavers

Executive summary

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getting young voices heard

Overview

Over the last decade, the Bright Spots programme has examined how children and young people themselves feel about their lives, giving a unique insight into the well-being of children in care and care leavers.

This report is produced by the Coram Institute for Children, the first Independent Research Organisation dedicated to children to mark the 50th anniversary of Coram Voice as the leading national charity for the voice of the child in care and care leavers.

Developed in partnership with Professor Julie Selwyn at the University of Oxford, the *Your Life Your Care* (for children in care) and *Your Life Beyond Care* (for care leavers) surveys were co-produced with children and young people to measure what they felt made their lives good.

This report draws on 27,000 of those responses from children and young people aged 4 to 25 and over across more than 70 local authorities gathered between 2015-2024. We also analysed over 100,000 written comments using a closed AI system and Coram researchers and held workshops with seven of Coram Voice's Care Experienced Consultants to look at themes and how to present findings.

Well-being matters

> I'm able to function but I'd like to do more than function I'd like to thrive. I want to get to where I want to be but often obstacles that are near impossible stop me which is very difficult.
>
> (Care leaver)

By prioritising well-being, we can create a care system where children and young people can thrive. Placing subjective well-being at the centre of children's social care policy and practice allows for a more meaningful assessment of success: whether services genuinely improve the daily lives of children in care and care leavers.

Too many children and young people struggle

Children in care and care leavers still have lower well-being than their peers in the general population, and the difference is larger for care leavers than for children in care. Care leavers wellbeing is declining – 32% had low well-being in 2021-24, compared with 29% in 2017-20. There has been no significant change for children in care.

Around 1 in 10 children in care and 1 in 3 care leavers have low wellbeing

In line with the general population, well-being decreases with age and there is a clear drop off in well-being for young people at 18, when most young people leave care.

> "The connections I had made with all the people who helped me while in care was instantly cut off and I can't speak to anyone anymore - which I'm sure you know destroys all the work done helping me. I feel lonely, useless, unfulfilled and 'dumped at the side of the road'. It's as if I was simply on a conveyor that ended the day I turned 18, ready to pick up the next helpless child to repeat the cycle"
>
> (Care leaver)

We can get it right

One of the most consistent findings in the Bright Spots surveys throughout the years has been that a majority of children in care (84%) report that their lives are getting better.

> "I like living with my foster carer. When I was at dad's I used to be on my phone all day and I used to have long lies and be late for school. Now I wake up early so I can go to school. I never used to get out in nature."
>
> (8-11 year-old)

Low well-being for children in care and care leavers is therefore not inevitable with two fifths of children in care and a fifth or care leavers having very high well-being.

If policy and practice focuses on the key things that drive well-being, we can ensure that even more children and young people have a good life, now and in the future.

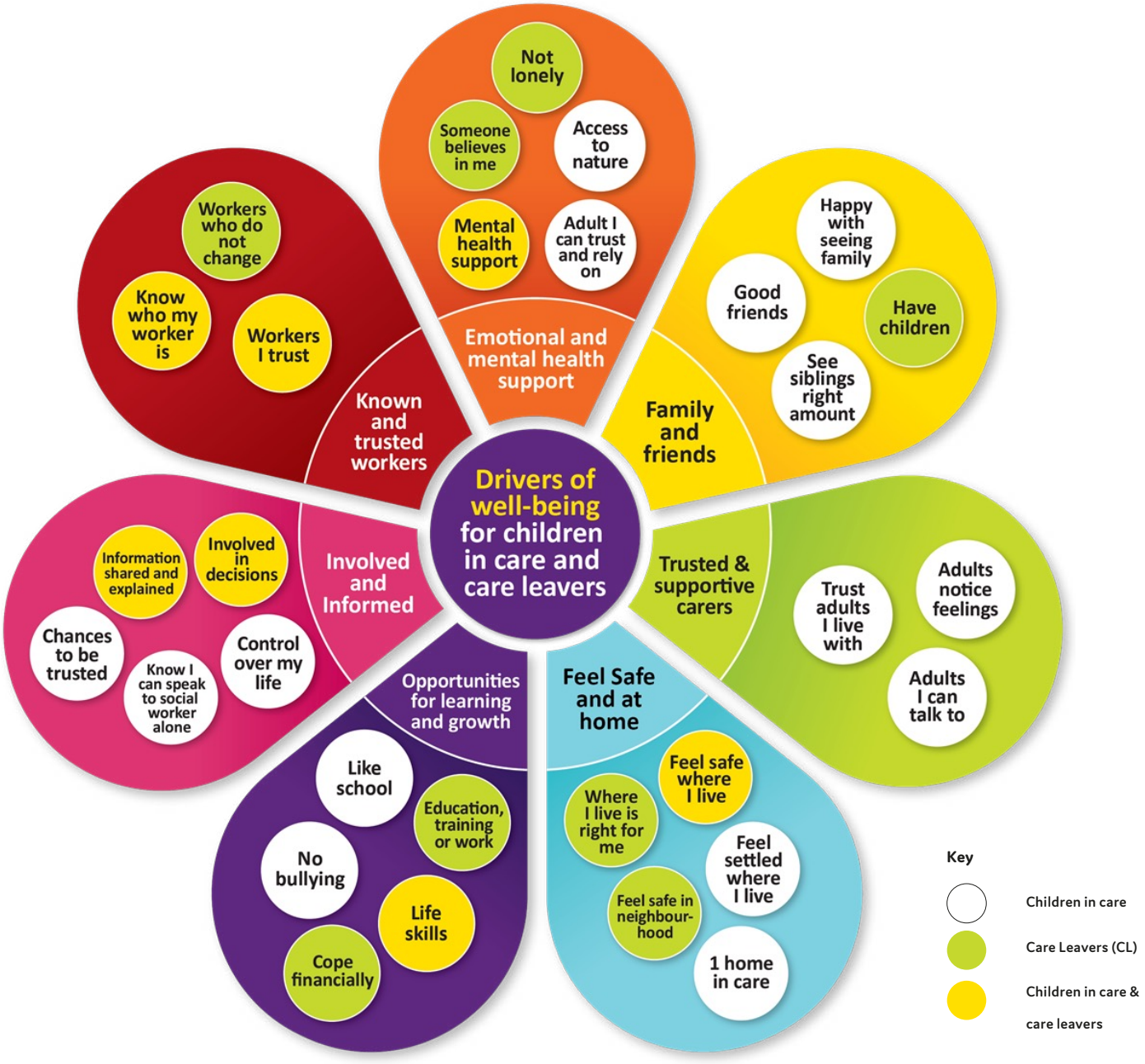
The seven drivers of well-being for children in care and care leavers

> "I was scared when I first moved into care as I thought that when I first moved in I was going to hate it, but it is not that bad. I feel like I am included into the family as if I had always been a part of their life. being in care helped me realize that I am not useless and that my life actually has meaning to it."
>
> (11-18 year-old)

All the questions we explore in the Bright Spots surveys cover aspects children in care and care leavers told us makes their lives good. By using statistical analysis we explored the areas that are most strongly linked to well-being. We also incorporated the written comments into this analysis.
We found that the key drivers of well-being can be grouped into seven areas.

Differences between different groups of children and young people

We found differences in well-being linked to age, gender, disability, time in care, and where children and young people live. The odds of low well-being increased if children and young people were female and as they got older. Children who were new to care and care leavers with a disability or long-term health condition had lower well-being. Children in care who lived in family-based placements (foster care, kinship foster care and parents) have higher wellbeing than those in residential care or 'other' forms of placements (mostly supported accommodation).



Conclusion and recommendations

While many children report positive experiences, too many still struggle, particularly as they leave care. Like all children and young people, children in care and care leavers deserve more than survival—they deserve the chance to thrive. Well-being is not a "nice extra" but a core outcome that influences health, education, and life chances. Listening to what young people say matters most is essential for shaping policy and practice. Relationships, safety, stability, and opportunities are key.

> "[LA] has to do better for their young people. They need to be more nurturing towards their young people – they need to be gardeners to the flowers (young people)".
>
> (Care leaver)

Improving well-being does not always require large budgets—small, consistent actions (like going to the park together or inviting friends over) and a culture that values children and young people's voices, making sure they are seen and heard can make a big difference.

1. Prioritise what children in care and care leavers say is important to their well-being as outcomes locally and nationally.

Children in care and care leavers' well-being should be central to how success is measured. Use tools like the Bright Spots surveys to embed voice and focus on the seven drivers of well-being when developing, delivering and evaluating services. Future improvements should integrate these drivers into national outcomes measures and Ofsted inspections of services.

2. Ensure policy and practice is led by the seven drivers of well-being for children in care and care leavers.

The seven drivers of well-being reflect what children and young people need for a good life. Policy, resources, and interventions should target these drivers nationally and locally. Bright Spots partner local authorities should use their local survey findings to address priorities identified by their children and young people.

3. Invest in and support children and young people to develop relationships that last into adulthood.

Trusting relationships are vital for children in care and care leavers. The care system should maximise family-based options where appropriate and prioritise maintaining key relationships. Professionals and carers should have the time and resources to get to know children and young people, listen, build trust and support connections with family (especially siblings), friends, and other important people in children's lives.

4. Improve support for care leavers and provide gradual and extended transitions

Too many care leavers are struggling. Services must reverse the decline in well-being, build lasting relationships, and ensure needs-led support by personal advisers who know young people well and have time to be there for them day-to-day. Care leavers should continue to be supported into adulthood to access education, training and employment, mental health services, financial support, and safe and suitable housing.

5. Embed listening to young people in policy and practice improvement.

Listening to children and young people must lead to meaningful action. To achieve this, robust engagement structures to capture voice (e.g. care plans, surveys,) and provide space to explore solutions (e.g. children in care councils) should be in place to influence their individual care, services and the system as a whole. A range of options for engagement should be available both locally and nationally, so young people can choose how and when to be involved.

6. Acknowledge difference

Well-being varies by age, gender, ethnicity, disability, and care experience, requiring tailored support. Services must address needs of specific groups, provide specialist services like expanded access to evidence-based mental health support, and stay alert to characteristics and experiences that are linked to lower well-being. Collaboration across government, including health and social care is essential for effective interventions.

For more findings and full report go to www.coramvoice.org.uk/fromsurvivingtothriving