

Friends, Brothers and sisters: Comments from the South East Regional Children in Care Council

April 2026

Background

In the care system, there is increasingly a focus on the relationships that children in care and care leavers have with adults, but not always on what supports them to keep and develop close connections with other young people – like friends, brothers and sisters.

Coram Voice Bright Spots research involving thousands of care experienced children and young people has found that these relationships are really important to making their lives good. They not only provide connection and chances to enjoy time together now, are often the people who will be there and support them when they are older.

Positively, the Government recently announced that they are shortly introducing new laws to ask local authorities to prioritise children in care's relationship with their brothers and sisters. We hope there will be a similar focus on how the care system support children in care and care leavers to keep and develop their relationships with friends – who our research has shown are the most common source of emotional support for care leavers.

What we did

In April 2026 young people from children in care councils and care leaver groups in the South East came together. Coram Voice ran a workshop on how the care system impacted on their relationships with other young people (friends, brothers and sisters) with 53 young people supported by 10 staff from Bracknell Forest, East Sussex, Kent, Reading, Surrey, West Sussex, Windsor and Maidenhead and Wokingham.

We asked the young people to show whether they agreed or disagreed with different statements relating to friends and siblings, by moving to different sides of the room. We then discussed why they disagreed, agreed or were not sure about each statement. At the end of the workshop, all young people could write down a key message about what the most important thing to change when spending time with friends and family. Eight young people shared their views this way. This report summarises what young people said in group discussion and in their written feedback.

What young people said

Key messages:

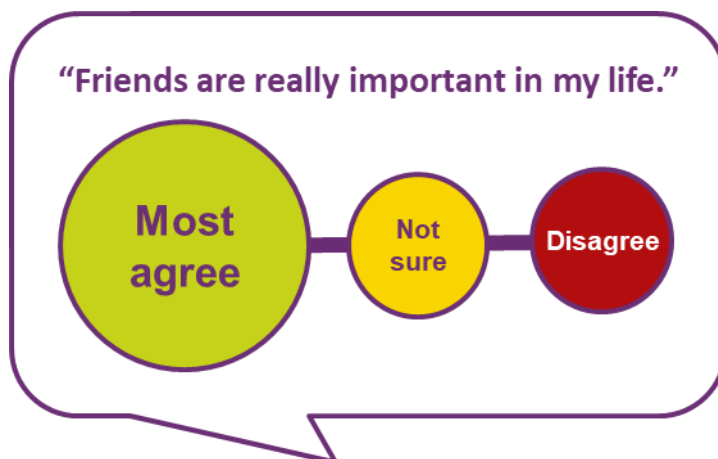
1. Ask us and listen to our views about seeing brothers and sisters – we often want to see them more, but sometimes choose not to.
2. Ask us about our friendships, but don't judge them.
3. Explain why decisions about who we can and cannot see are made and make sure we understand them.
4. Remove blanket rules that stop us from seeing friends and siblings – make sure that each situation is looked at individually to maximise opportunities for us to be together.
5. Give us a chance to manage our own relationships, but also help make arrangements that mean we can see siblings or friends when, where and how we want to – for example paying for travelling, arranging things with carers and providing opportunities to do fun activities together.

The importance of friendships

Most young people felt that friends were really important in their lives. They described them as a source of emotional support and comfort.

*“friends feel more important.
Spending time with family is
useless if it harms you, it's bad.”*

However, some disagreed. One young person said that their friends were not the be all and end all in their lives.



Seeing friends

Although some young people felt that they had enough time to see their friends, more disagreed. Some placed themselves more in the middle, and whether you saw them depended on who you were talking about and could depend on other commitments like school and work and whether you lived far away.

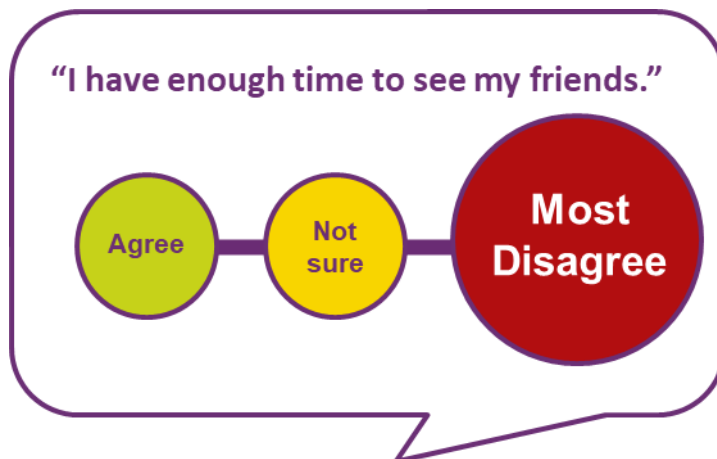
“Life gets in the way”

“Not enough hours in the day”

“Too tired”

“Majority I see several times a week, but some I haven’t seen for years”

“I don’t have a lot of friends”



Seeing brothers and sisters

Most young people agreed that seeing siblings was important to them. However, they pointed out that this depended on which siblings you were talking about and that all relationships are individual. To keep a relationship needed both sides to make the effort. You may want to see your brothers or sisters, but they may not want to see you.

“I won’t waste my time if he is doing nothing”

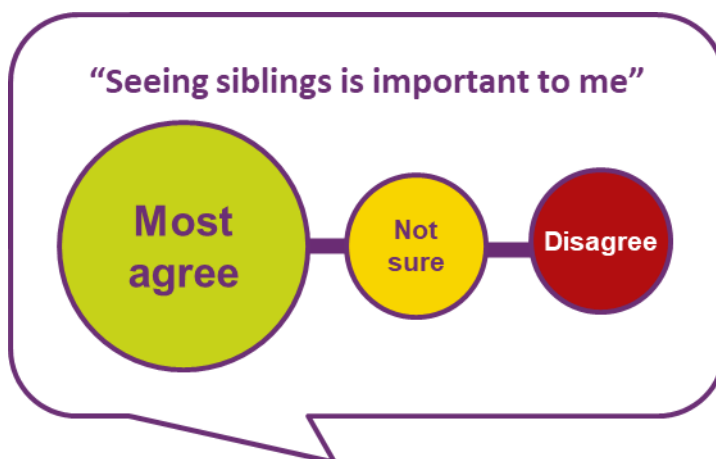
One young person mentioned this in relation to wider family too:

“Make our mum answer [her] emails so we can see her – better communication”

Those that wanted to see their brothers and sisters more asked for more flexibility and more regular time together.

“Considering how long [the] gap can be in between contact”

“More opportunity to see my siblings, more flexibility – too many barriers to seeing them.”



Where you live and distance

Like in our Bright Spots research young people's relationships were affected by where they lived. Young people pointed out that adoption sometimes limited whether they could see their brothers or sisters and may only have contact via letters or a couple of times a year. Living in different places or far away could mean that you need help to make arrangements to see each other. Young people mentioned siblings going away to university.

"I get little time as we live in different areas"

"The think I would change would be the journey, how long they can take, the amount of time spent with them,"

Rules and restrictions

"[I would change] restrictions – too many, seeing friends being yourself/being a child"

One young person described not being able to have sleepover with a friend who was still 17, after they themselves had turned 18.

"To many restrictions for children in care affecting friendships e.g. needing DBS ([I am in the] same school year [as my friend] but one [of us is] 17 and one 18)"

Having a say

Although some did feel that they could decide when and how they saw their brothers and sisters, more disagreed. Young people talked about issues with social workers not being able to coordinate to make arrangements or not being able to visit siblings where they lived. They also felt that they didn't always get an explanation of why decisions were made.



"Being able to choose/time to be in conversation about activities and/or places to go."

"Social workers [should] listen more, respect you more"

Young people who felt that they had a say included those who felt they could make their own arrangements.

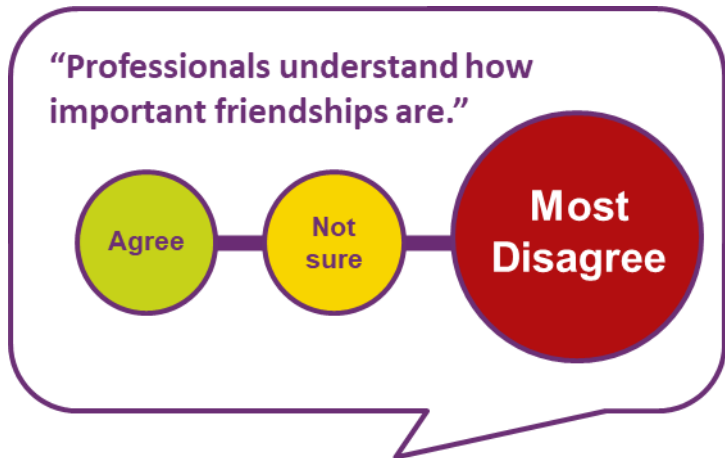
"I manage it myself so I can message them"

But it was also important that professionals act on their views.

“[I want] better communication between professionals – miscommunication can lead to arguments i.e. saying you’re going to do something and not actually doing it.”

Relationship with workers

Although some felt that professionals understood the importance of their friendships, more disagreed. Some felt that adults may not value friendships as much as they thought friends were not as important when you are older. Young people described social workers not asking enough about friendships or not listening or trying to help them. Some who were unsure felt that some workers had cared and others had not. Young people mentioned that to be a good social worker you had to learn to care. Workers showed that they cared when they remembered what you had talked about before, showed an interest in what you had to say.



Talking about relationships

The group was about evenly split on whether they felt they could talk to professionals about their friendships. Trust was important in order to be able to talk about relationships. Young people who agreed that professionals understood the importance of their friendships felt trusted with them. Changes in workers made it more difficult to talk to them.



“PA changing – when workers change a lot I can’t trust them to talk to them about relationships”

Whether you felt able to talk to workers depended on how they came across, were open and honest, or cut you off if they felt you went off on a tangent. Whether they took an interest and asked about friends was important or whether young people just felt they were ticking of a list of things that they needed to check. Several young people mentioned that high caseloads could make time together feel rushed. It could also be difficult if workers had negative views about friends.

“Social workers need to not judge friends and say they are a bad influence – makes me defensive and dislike them”