

## **Executive Summary**

Although outcomes for children in care have improved in recent years, there remains a significant and widening gap between these and the outcomes for all children. This situation is unacceptable and needs to be addressed urgently. This Green Paper sets out a radical package of proposals for change which will be delivered only through absolute commitment from central and local government and from professionals working on the front line. We have no doubt that this commitment exists.

In setting our priorities for change, we are driven by the knowledge that these are our children, and that the childhood we are giving them has not been good enough. We have an excellent legacy of achievement on which to build, and a dedicated workforce standing ready to deliver. The time has come to accelerate the pace of change, and to make care not only a way out of difficult situations at home, but a bridge to a better childhood and a better future.

### **The case for reform**

1. Chapter 1 sets out the shocking statistics on the education of children in care. Only 11% of children in care attained 5 good GCSEs in 2005 compared with 56% of all children, and similar performance gaps exist at all ages both before and after Key Stage 4.
2. The long-term outcomes of children in care are also devastating. They are over-represented in a range of vulnerable groups including those not in education, employment or training post-16, teenage parents, young offenders, drug users and prisoners.
3. A lot of progress has been made for children over the last decade. We have seen an increase of eleven percentage points in the proportion of all young people gaining 5 A\*-C GCSEs, and the proportion of young people in education, employment or training by 19 now stands at 87% - the highest it has ever been.
4. In the early years too, the dedication of local residents and professionals to the Sure Start agenda has contributed to a rise in registered childcare places to 1.26 million – almost double the level in 1997 – and the creation of 894 Children's Centres, offering services to over 715,000 children and their families.
5. We have also taken a range of steps to address directly the problems experienced by children in care, and progress has been made through a number of reforms including:
  - Quality Protects in 1998;
  - The Care Standards Act 2000;
  - The Prime Minister's adoption initiative;

- The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000;
- The Social Exclusion Unit 2003 report on the Education of Children in Care; and
- The duty in the Children Act 2004 for local authorities to promote the education of children in care.

6. The outcomes of the 60,000 children in care at any one time have improved in recent years: the proportion gaining 5 A\*-C GCSEs has risen from 7% in 2000 to 11% in 2005 and the proportion known to be participating in education, employment or training at age 19 has increased by 8% since 2002, when the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 came into effect. But it is clear that they are not improving at the same rate as those of all children.

7. Children in care are a group who are especially deserving of our help precisely because they are in care. As their corporate parent the State cannot and must not accept any less for them than we would for our own children.

### **Children on the edge of care**

8. While most of the proposals in this Green Paper are aimed at children already in the care of the local authority, it is important also to recognise that many children come in and out of care in a short space of time, and several spend more than one period in care. Chapter 2 therefore looks at the sorts of interventions which can help to prevent children needing to come into care in the first place, and to resettle them with their families after being in care where that is the best option for the child.

9. This means – in line with our reforms of children’s services through the *Every Child Matters* programme – identifying problems early and responding to them quickly by offering sustained, multi-disciplinary support.

10. Our proposals include:

- New research on identifying and responding to neglect;
- Testing out a model of intensive whole-family therapy which aims to keep families together where possible;
- Improving the links between adults’ and children’s services in order to ensure that professionals working with either group see the family as a whole; and
- Creating a National Centre for Excellence in Children’s Services in order to identify and spread evidence-based solutions to the problems experienced by families whose children are on the edge of care.

11. Chapter 2 also launches a national debate on the future of care. We want to use the Green Paper to explore who care is for, whether there are any groups of children for whom care is not an appropriate response, and what we want the population of children in care to look like in the future.

### **The role of the corporate parent**

12. Children have told us that the lack of a consistent adult in their lives is a major and harmful feature of being in care. Chapter 3 sets out in detail how the corporate parenting role should be carried out in order to address this gap.

13. Our proposals include:

- Exploring the feasibility of piloting new independent 'social care practices', small independent groups of social workers who contract with the local authority to provide services to children in care;
- Piloting the use of individual budgets for each child in care to be held by their lead professional - the social worker;
- Clarity over the role and use of care plans; and
- A revitalisation of the independent visitor scheme in order to provide 'independent advocates' for children in care.

### **Better placements**

14. Evidence shows that frequent moves between care placements have a drastic effect on the ability of children and young people to succeed both in education and in other areas of their lives. Currently children in care are moved between placements far too frequently.

15. Chapter 4 sets out proposals radically to reform the placement system, improving the number and quality of foster carers and ensuring that children are only placed in residential children's homes which meet high standards of care.

16. Our proposals include:

- Introducing a tiered framework for foster placements to respond to different levels of need, underpinned by a new qualifications framework, fee structure and national minimum standards;
- Piloting for younger children the use of intensive foster care with multi-agency support;
- Improving the recruitment of foster carers through specially-tailored recruitment campaigns;
- Extending use of specialist foster care for children with complex needs; and
- Introducing new regional commissioning units to secure better value for money and introduce placement choice for children.

### **A first class education**

17. While the experiences they have in their placement are critical to children in care, the school environment and the way in which teachers and other school staff work with them are also vital to their chances of success. But many children in care currently have a poor experience of school: they tend to be in lower performing schools, be moved round between schools too often, and receive insufficient support within school to flourish.

18. Chapter 5 sets out how we will work with local authorities as corporate parents and with schools to secure the very best education possible for these children. We want to ensure that every child in care is in a good school, and is given the support they need to make the most of being in that school. We are committed to ensure that children in care also fare well in our further education system.

19. Our proposals include:

- Piloting the introduction of a 'virtual headteacher' in every local area responsible for driving up the performance of schools in relation to children in care;
- Providing local authorities with the power to direct schools to admit children in care, even where the school is fully subscribed;
- An enhanced entitlement to free school transport to ensure that where children do move placement they do not necessarily also need to change school;
- Better support in school to prevent exclusions of children in care; and
- A dedicated budget for each social worker to spend on improving the educational experience of every child in care.

### **Life outside school**

20. This Green Paper is not only about the part which education and social services have to play in improving the lives of children and young people. It is truly a cross-Government agenda. Taking as its starting point the aim of securing for children in care the kind of happy, fulfilled childhood which we would want for our own children, the Green Paper also has a range of proposals for ensuring that children in care access all the other types of positive activities and support which children generally tend to enjoy.

21. Our proposals include:

- Encouraging local authorities to provide free access for children in care to all their facilities including leisure centres, sports grounds and youth clubs;
- A new model of comprehensive health provision for each child in care;
- Better training for a range of professionals including paediatricians on how to work with children in care;
- Improved access for children in care and their foster parents to Children's Centre provision; and
- Enhanced opportunities for them to participate in stimulating and rewarding personal development activities and volunteering.

### **The transition to adult life**

22. We know that the long-term outcomes of many people who were in care as children are distressing: care leavers are over-represented in some of our most vulnerable groups of adults including young parents, prisoners, and

the homeless. They are also under-represented in further and higher education, and the proportion of young people leaving care aged 19 without any form of purposeful activity such as employment, training or education is much higher than that of their peers.

23. This Green Paper signals a turning point in the way young people in care are treated as they grow older. We want to abandon a system where young people are forced to leave care as early as age 16. We want an approach which continues to support them as long as they need it, which ceases to talk about 'leaving care' and instead ensures that young people move on in a gradual, phased and above all prepared way.

24. Our proposals include:

- Piloting a veto for young people over any decisions about moving on from care before they turn 18;
- Piloting allowing young people to continue to live with foster carers up to the age of 21, receiving the support they need to continue in education;
- Providing a top-up to the Child Trust Funds of young people in care.
- Creating supported accommodation for older young people; and
- Introducing a national bursary for children in care going to university.

### **Making the system work**

25. We are confident that the proposals set out in this Green Paper will deliver a step change in the outcomes of children in care. But as the corporate parent of children in care we cannot rely on expectations alone: we need to take decisive action in instances of failure. Chapter 8 therefore sets out a new accountability framework which works with the grain of the forthcoming Local Government White Paper to ensure that failure for this group of vulnerable children is identified and addressed.

26. Our proposals include:

- Asking Ofsted to carry out a regular inspection of how each local authority is meeting the educational needs of children in care;
- Introducing an annual national stock-take by Ministers of the progress of children in care;
- Expecting every local authority to set up a 'children in care council';
- Making Independent Reviewing Officers more independent; and
- Making the education of children in care one of the DfES's key national priorities for local government.

### **Next steps**

27. We want to hear a range of views on this package of proposals – particularly those of children and young people who are or have been in care. We are offering a range of ways to take part in this consultation exercise, which runs from 9 October until 15 January. This will include conferences and

events throughout the country as well as the setting up of working groups looking at:

- **The future of the care population;**
- **Social care practices;**
- **Placement reform; and**
- **Best practice in schools.**

We value your responses to this document highly and we will take into account the views which you give us during the consultation period. After the consultation we will publish an initial response, including a version for young people in 2007. Final decisions on proposals with cost implications from 2008/09 onwards will be taken in the context of the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review.