

Annex A

Children's views on care

A.1 Children in care have strong views about how they should be looked after and what they want to achieve. They want to enjoy a happy childhood and look forward to a positive future.

“My ambition is to become a doctor. I know that I need to work hard in my studies to get there.”

A.2 Their views have been at the centre of our thinking in developing the proposals in this Green Paper, which reflect what children themselves have told us they want and need. This annex sets out the key messages from our conversations with them. In doing that, it draws on:

Focus groups and text surveys of children in care held as part of developing policy within this Green Paper, including specific groups with children with disabilities and children from black and minority ethnic families;

Reports and consultations by the Children's Rights Director; and

Independent research and consultation with children and young people who are or have been in care.

A.3 The message that came through consistently and powerfully is that these are children like any others. They have the same ambitions, and the same need for a secure and positive environment at home and at school, as every child.

“I want to be a mum but I also want to be famous. I know it sounds stupid but what is what I would like. I would like to be an actress, singer or model but I'm just hoping that if I have enough determination then something will come up.”

Key messages from children

A.4 As a group, children in care believe that things can be better. They have told us that care has made a difference to their lives, but also that it should be different in future. Many say that they want to become social workers or foster carers themselves and believe that their experience would let them do better for children in future.

“I want to work with children and young people who have grown up with the same or similar situation as me.”

A.5 In all of our conversations with children, and in the research and other evidence we have seen, there are a number of points that come up again and again as important to children in care. These are:

Children in care want to be treated as individuals, listened to, and helped to realise their ambitions.

Social workers should listen to children more, and take their views seriously in key decisions.

Children want an ordinary, supportive school experience, and don't want to be stigmatised or singled out because they're in care.

Young people want more support leaving care, and more choice about when and how they leave.

A.6 These are the messages that have been at the forefront of our minds in building our strategy for transforming the outcomes of children in care. They are what children have told us matters most to them. But there is a great deal more that is important to children and which has informed our thinking in every part of this Green Paper.

Children on the edge of care

A.7 Children told us that more effort needs to be made to deal with family problems so they don't need to come into care, and that listening to children more could make all the difference.

“If there are problems – solve them.”

A.8 Some children felt that they and their families had not had nearly enough help or warning before they came into care. Others had more positive experiences of receiving counselling and meetings with social workers. Children also felt that they should have had more help with the process of entering care and adjusting to the change in their lives.

“Most people don't even know they're going into care.”

A.9 Children told us that they need better and more seamless help before, during and after their time in care. Some said, for instance, that it would help for people to be able to spend some of their time with foster carers, and some with their parents.

The role of the corporate parent

A.10 Children and young people in care felt strongly that the social worker is an important person in their lives, and should be there to offer them help and support. They felt that social workers change too often and as a result they can lack a consistent person in their lives. They told us that their three biggest wishes about social workers are:

that they should help with personal problems;

that they should get you practical help when you need it; and

that they should always be there to listen to children.

A.11 There is no doubt that good social workers make all the difference. Children who have a good relationship with their social worker are very positive and say that the social worker helps them a great deal. The

important thing is for social workers to be consistent, to have a personal relationship with the child, and to be someone they can turn to when they need help.

“ My social worker is great. She knows lots about children with disabilities like me.”

Ensuring children are in the right placement

A.12 Children believe, rightly, that their placement should provide them with a safe and happy home while they are in care.

“ You should be able to talk to foster parents about problems just like your Mum and Dad.”

A.13 But they told us there are some real problems with how placements work now. Many had been through a series of placements, and felt that social workers and carers didn't always listen to them or put their needs first. There were a number of key messages from children about what we need to address in order to improve placements:

Children want a choice of placement while in care, and a backup option available if things go wrong.

You can have a good or bad social worker, or a good or bad placement, regardless of how many “stars” your council has got.

Ensure that the police are not involved following incidents in children's homes when they would not be involved if it happened in a domestic home – for example, many young people break things in a temper, but those in homes may get a criminal record for it.

Foster carers need more specific training in supporting children who may need special help with particular issues or problems.

Foster carers should be able to make all the usual decisions that parents make, as long as they keep to the agreed care plan – they should not need the social worker's approval about things like staying overnight with friends, or going on a foreign holiday as a family.

A first class education

A.14 Young people in care were positive about school, and believe that education is important to their future. However, they felt that they are often singled out in school because they are in care and that a lack of understanding from teachers and support from social workers and carers can add to the problems they face in education.

“ My maths teacher told my whole class that I'm in care.”

A.15 Children told us that schools should not be made to feel different from other children and that schools need to have a greater understanding about being in care. Some children had met their designated teacher and were aware of them as a source of help, but many didn't know that such a person existed at all.

A.16 Children felt that there was much more schools could do to help them stay in and get the most from school. Children suggested that they should have tutoring in and out of school, that they need more help to minimise bullying because of being in care, and that schools need to

understand them and be patient with them. Many children told us about being singled out at school in an unhelpful way, such as being pulled out of lessons for review meetings or to see social workers.

Life outside school

A.17 Having an enjoyable and positive experience of life outside of school is just as important to children in care as any other child. Some children were very positive about what care offered. They felt it gave them a sense of freedom and safety they hadn't had at home, and for some it offered real differences like a clothing allowance and choice over how to spend their time.

A.18 Some children felt that they had fewer opportunities to take part in activities outside school as a result of being in care. Some told us that they had to give up hobbies and activities that were important to them because of a change of placement.

“ [I want] to be able to join clubs and stay there, even when you move.”

A.19 Children believe that carers and social workers should make a special effort to help them take part in positive activities.

“ I live in a cottage in the countryside and I can't get lifts at night, and I can't drive. There should be more transport if you don't live in a town.”

The transition to adult life

A.20 Young people in care have mixed views about their future. Some are ambitious and hopeful about what they might one day achieve but others have real worries about the impact their childhood experiences could have on their future.

“ [Young people should have] a roof over their head until they've sorted themselves out.”

A.21 In our conversations with children in care, younger children were more likely to be optimistic about their future and to expect to go on to university or further education after finishing school. Older children were often uncertain about what they would do after leaving care, or how they would support themselves.

A.22 The key messages from young people about entering adult life that emerged through research and our discussions with them were that:

Young people leaving care feel they are not supported well enough, and can't cope with work and education at the same time as learning how to manage money and fend for themselves.

Young people should leave care when they are ready, not at a particular age, and that the right support should be there when they do.

Young people should be able to stay with their foster carers after leaving care and be able to return to them after they have left, just like other young people do with their birth families.

