



# OUR LIVES OUR CARE

Looked after children's views on their well-being in 2017

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**coram**  
**Voice**   
 getting young voices heard

**SUMMARY**

## Introduction

Over the past five years, the University of Bristol and Coram Voice, have been developing the Bright Spots programme, which helps local authorities better understand the well-being of the children in care.

Official statistics provide only a partial picture of children in care. Data focuses on areas such as where children live, how many moves they have and how they are doing in terms of education and mental health. Measurement is predominantly of negative outcomes such as substance misuse or involvement with the criminal justice system. None of this tells us about the experience of care from children's own viewpoints: are they happy, safe and feel they are doing well?

The Bright Spots programme addresses the knowledge gap. The project has created a set of well-being indicators to allow services to design their work around what young people say is important to them. The indicators are measured by an online survey - 'Your Life, Your Care' (YLYC).

In 2016/17, the **Your Life, Your Care** surveys were completed by 2,263 looked after children and young people from 16 local authority areas.

Three different surveys were designed for the age groups:

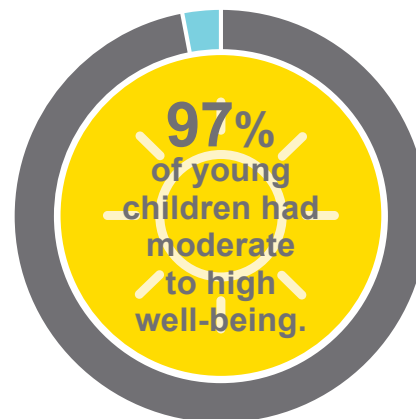
4-7yrs

8-10yrs

11-18yrs

17 core questions appeared in each survey. Survey questions asked about subjective well-being: how children and young people felt, thought, and experienced their lives in care. The children and young people were representative of the national looked after population by age, gender, placement type, length of time in care and number of moves in care. Minority ethnic children and young people were over-represented making up 37% of all those who responded.

## Children age 4-7yrs (n=365)



Just 25 (3%) children had a profile of negative responses to the survey questions that suggested they had low well-being. They were children who did not understand why they were in care, and who did not know who their social worker was. A few of these children were also very unsettled in their placements, not trusting their carers and not believing their carers noticed how they were feeling.

### Children's Views 4-7yrs

I like living in my house but I want more hugs.

I would like to know when I will live with my forever family.

I miss my mummy.

I like living with nanny and grandad because I get to play and they look after me.

I like the food and I love my carer and my family.

I am very HAPPY and I love my carers.

My bed feels comfy.



Children age  
4-7yrs



Children were very positive about school with **92% stating that they mostly liked school.**



The youngest children (4-7yrs) were less likely than the older children to know who their social worker was.



About half of 4-7 year olds felt that an adult had not fully explained why they were in care.

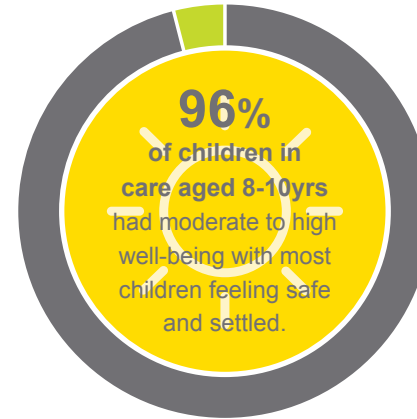


About 6% were unsettled in their placements and 3% did not always feel safe in their placements.

Children age  
8-10yrs  
(n=593)



The vast majority (97%) trusted their carer, had a trusted adult (96%) in their lives and 89% trusted their social worker.



More than **one in 10 (13%)** did not know who their social worker was.

Children's Views  
4-7yrs

I would like to know for absolutely certain that I will always stay with mummy (foster carer). I love her and she loves me.

I like being in care.

My social worker is so so good.

Is the judge a nice person who will see my mummy really tries?

I get bored.

It's sad because I only get to see my mum a little. I miss my dad too.

Children's Views  
8-10yrs


Everything is good.

I wouldn't change anything except not having to eat avocados and courgettes.

Sometimes people shout at home.

I love being with my foster carer.

Children age  
8-10yrs




13% had no contact with either parent. Generally, children were more satisfied with their contact arrangements than the 11-18yrs group. About 46% described maternal contact arrangements as just right, but

+  
About  
**1 in 3** wanted  
more parental  
contact


-  
and **5%**  
wanted less  
parental  
contact.

The majority (52%) were satisfied with sibling contact but 16% wanted less.


We do not know why children wanted less contact but perhaps siblings were living in the same placement and their relationships were difficult.




**88%** liked school 'a lot' or 'a bit' and felt their carers were interested in what they did.



However, **177** children (**30%**) were afraid to go to school because of bullying of whom **21 (12%)** reported insufficient support.



Twenty-one children (4%) gave negative responses to at least three questions. That group of children were categorised as having low well-being. This group of children appeared to be quite isolated and to have unsatisfactory contact arrangements (reporting too little or too much). They did not feel safe or settled in their placements, did not have a trusted adult in their lives, did not feel included in decision-making, did not trust their social worker or have a good friend.



Most (63%) of the children aged 8-10yrs worried about their feelings or their behaviour 'most' or 'some of the time' with 10% answering that they had no help with their worries.



Children's Views  
8-10yrs

[I want] to let mum see us a bit more.

I want to be normal. I don't want to have a social worker or meetings.

[ I want } to be able to talk to my mum on the phone unsupervised.

To be able to go out with friends on my own like other children in my class do.

Children's Views  
8-10yrs

I would like to know more about my parents.

To see my brothers and sisters.

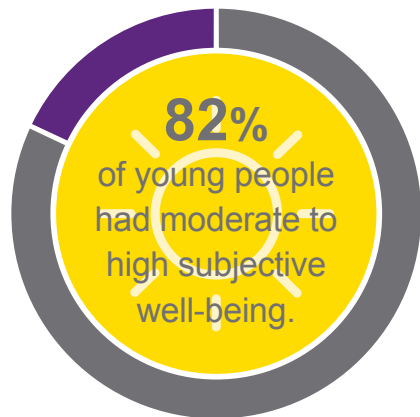
I would like cake more often.

I would like to see previous foster carers.

I would like to go back and live with my mum and I would like my social worker to help me do that.

**Young people  
11-18yrs**  
(n=1,305)

The majority of young people were positive about their care experiences:



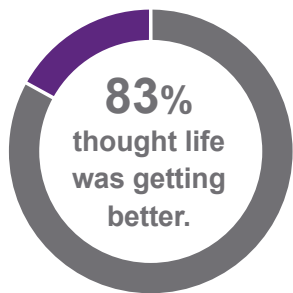
Well-being was higher for those who had been looked after for two years or more.

**Young People's Views  
11-18yrs**

I don't see this as foster care. This is my other family.

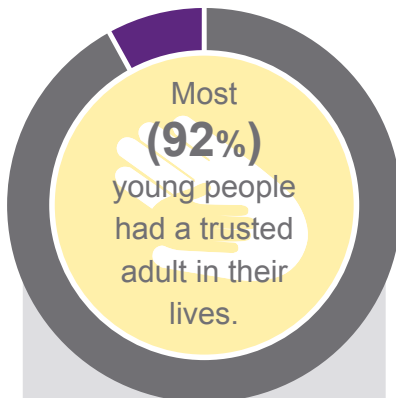
Being in care is the best thing that has happened to me. So many amazing opportunities have opened... like my attendance is significantly improved and I have so much support around me. I am very happy.

Care has made my life better. It has also made me be able to have a better future with more options to choose from.



**In comparison with young people in the general population: a larger proportion of looked after young people felt safe where they were living; more boys liked school; and both girls and boys felt that their carers were interested in what they were doing in school.**

Young people wrote about the opportunities being in care brought and specifically the benefits of being in education.



Most young people trusted their social workers and thought their carers were sensitive and noticed how they were feeling.



**Young People's Views  
11-18yrs**

They don't let u on the Internet or go and see your friends.

I trust the people I live with to sort out any problems I have. I know we can sort it out between us as a family.

I think everyone should have a person to talk to without being scared.



**One in ten** adolescents in care did not have a good friend.

Being friendless was associated with moves in care, and not having access to a computer/tablet outside school. Research<sup>1</sup> has found that lack of friends is associated with loneliness, anxiety and poor outcomes.

<sup>1</sup> Hawkey, L.C., & Cacioppo, J.T. (2010). Loneliness matters: a theoretical and empirical review of consequences and mechanisms. *Ann Behav Med* 40, 218–227.



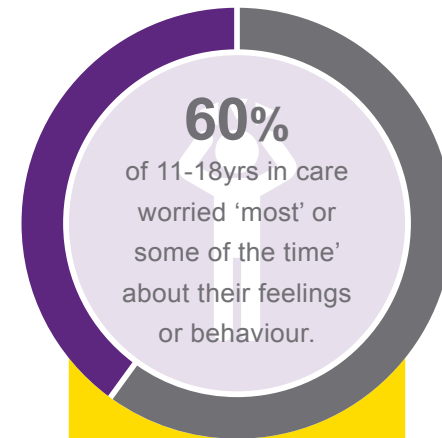
Young people 11-18yrs



28% of young people had no contact with either parent. Written comments from young people reflected that often lack of contact was their choice, although many also wished their parents could be more reliable and caring. In addition, more than one in four recorded that contact with parents was too infrequent. Asylum seeking young people wanted to know if their family were alive and to let their parents know they were safe and well. 3% felt they were having too much contact with a parent: these young people felt they received less favourable treatment than their siblings.



Some young people wrote about experiencing stigma because of being in care. They felt they did not fit in, were different, disliked professionals picking them up wearing their council ID badges or talking about the young person's background where others could hear.



More than one in five thought they were getting insufficient help with their worries.

Young People's Views 11-18yrs

Mum and dad are a waste of space, useless.

I have no idea whether family are alive or dead.

I don't like the place me and my mum have contact. It is too small and there is not much to do.

Young People's Views 11-18yrs

Being in care is the best thing that has happened to me because now I feel safe.

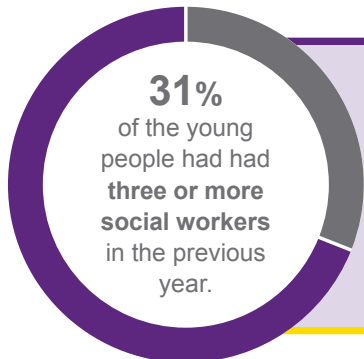
Most of the time I don't really feel like I fit in.

No-one sticks around and there is so many changes all the time. I have not gotten the opportunity to settle. No-one really listens.





Young people 11-18yrs



Many young people wrote about their dislike of social work changes. Young people with frequent changes were less likely to trust their social workers. The percentage of young people who had only had one social worker in the previous year varied by local authority (range 17% - 53% with one worker).

Number of previous placements varied by local authority. The number of young people with more than 5 placements after three or more years in care varied from 41% to only 11% between participating local authorities.

Moves in care were associated with young people not feeling settled in their current placement.



Young People's Views 11-18yrs

Social workers don't actually know me. They read about me off a piece of paper. I've had so many I can't even count.

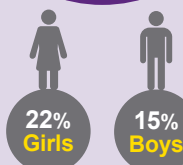
Being moved around is horrible. Being with foster carers that I hated. Being told what to do by someone you don't know and the lack of control over your own life.



Young people's low well-being was predicted by:

- a) **Lack of positive relationships** - not being happy with personal appearance, not having a trusted adult in their lives, being fearful of bullying and disliking school, not being given opportunities to be trusted and feeling unable to do the same things as friends.
- b) **Rights not being met** - feeling excluded from decision-making, unsafe in placements and not liking their bedrooms, and feeling that life skills were not being taught

There was variation in low well-being by: **local authority, gender and ethnicity.**



Had low well-being

In comparison with white and Asian young people there was a larger proportion of mixed ethnicity and black young people with low well-being.

Young People's Views 11-18yrs

Social services should listen to our opinions.

I think I came into care too late. Things were already pretty awful and being in care didn't make that better. I have never been able to make the most of opportunities given to me... I can't see me ever being able to turn things around and have a family.

I just want to know who my real mum is.

## Recommendations for practice

Overall the majority of children and young people had similar levels of subjective well-being as their peers in the general population. Social workers and carers can improve children's well-being by:

Ensuring the difficult conversations are had, especially with the youngest children, to help them understand why they are in care and why decisions are being made.

Recognising that moves are "scary" for children and young people and threaten children's sense of security. Children and young people need preparation for moves but also need to know that a permanent placement is being sought. Children want stability.

Becoming a more active listener, ensuring that children's concerns and worries are not dismissed. Give children and young people more opportunities to be trusted even after they have made a mistake or let themselves down.

Revisiting contact plans and care plans regularly and listen to children and young people's requests. Ensure that 'bans' on mobiles/Internet use are needed as they interfere with a young person's ability to have normal communication with friends.

Ensuring every child has a trusted adult in their lives.

Asking about friendships and relationships with siblings. Intervene if sibling bullying is an issue or if bullying is making a child fearful of going to school.

Asking about whether young people like their appearance paying particular attention to building girl's self-confidence.

Being aware that children and young people do not like to be perceived as "different" by their friends. Avoid any actions where the young person could feel stigmatised as a "looked after child".





