

Life in children's homes

A report of children's experience
by the Children's Rights Director for England

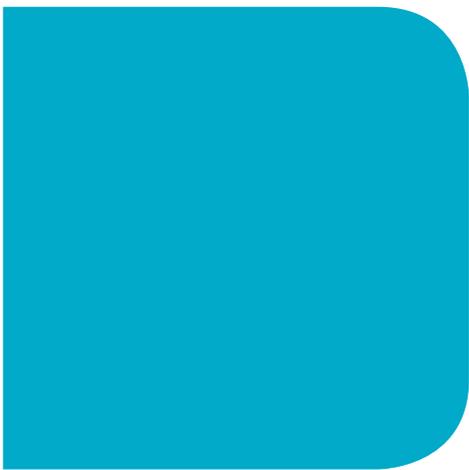


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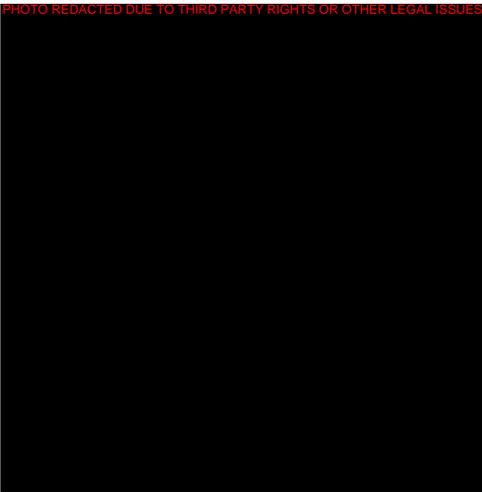


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About the Children's Rights Director



Roger Morgan, Children's Rights Director for England

The law sets out my duties as Children's Rights Director for England. One of my main duties is to ask children and young people for their views about how children are looked after in England. This includes children living away from home, and children getting any sort of help from council social care services.

As well as asking children for their views and publishing what they tell us, I and my team also give advice on children's views and on children's rights and welfare to Her Majesty's Chief Inspector at Ofsted, and to the Government. We have a duty to raise any issues we think are important about the rights and welfare of children living away from home or getting children's social care support. We do this both for individual children and for whole groups of children.

We have written reports about many things that are important to children and young people in care, being helped by social care services, or living away from home. These reports have usually included the views of many children and young people living in children's homes. But we have never written a report that simply says what it is like to live in a children's home. That is what this report is about.

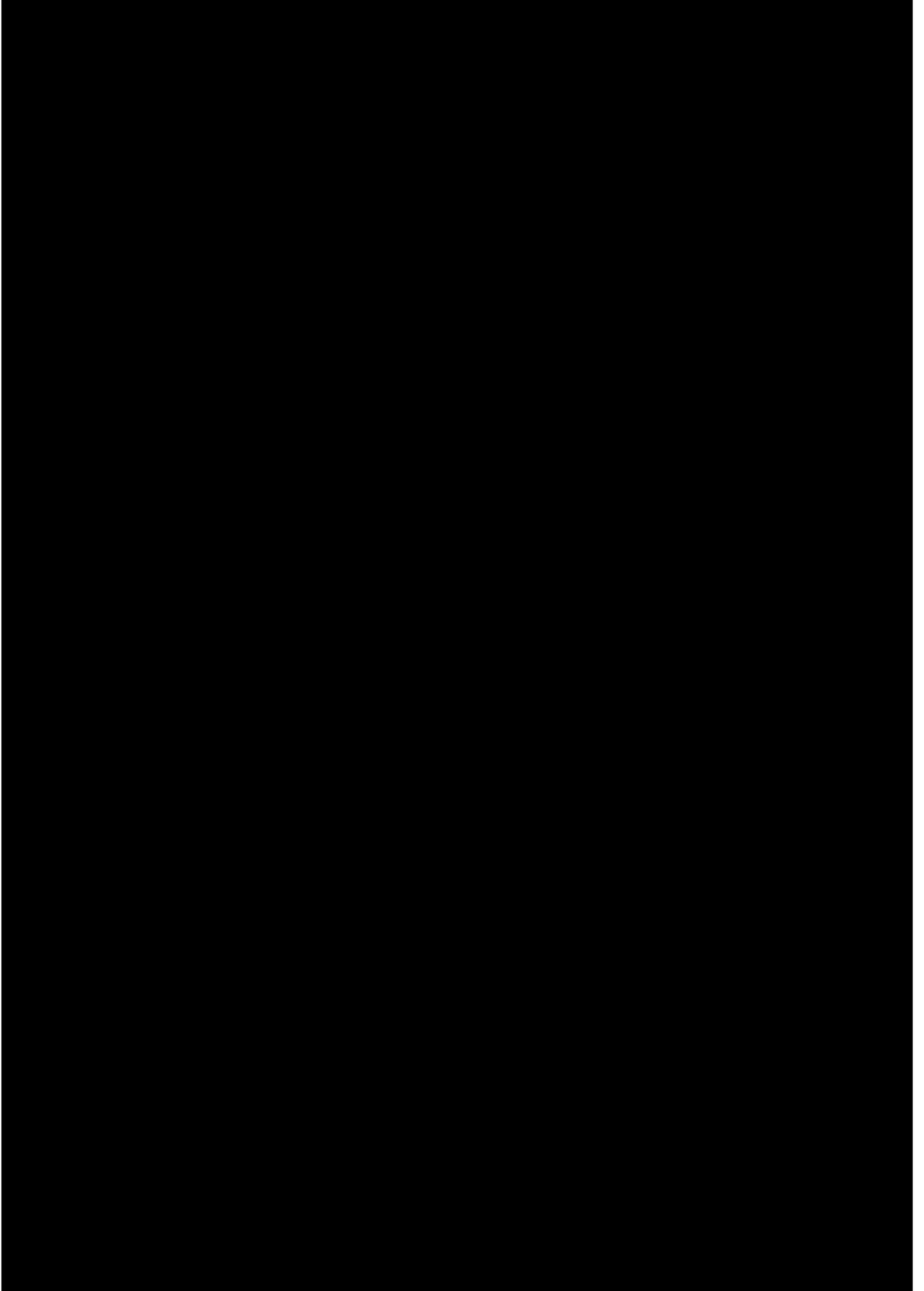
We are publishing other reports about young people's experiences of living in different types of residential establishment. *Life in secure care* is about young people's experiences of living in secure children's homes, *Life in residential special schools* is about people's experiences of having both residential care and education in a special school, and *Life in residential further education* is about being a student aged under 18 living in a further education college. We have already published reports about the experience of being adopted, of living in foster care, of being a boarder in a boarding school, and of life in residential family centres.

For people who know about children's homes, or who run them or work in them, I hope this report will give a useful picture of what life is like for the children and young people who live in homes across the country, so that any particular home can be checked against it. For those who do not know a great deal about children's homes, I hope this report will give a fair picture of what it is like to live in one.

Like all my reports, this report is being published for everyone to read. You can find copies of all my reports on our website: www.rights4me.org.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read 'Roger Morgan'.

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How we asked for young people's views

For this report we used two different ways of asking children and young people for their views about life in children's homes. First, we invited children in different children's homes across the country (we picked the homes at random) to fill in a web survey about their experiences. We sent them a username and password, so only the children invited to fill in the survey could log on to it. In all the questions asking for children and young people's views we asked them to write their own views and ideas without us suggesting any possible answers to them. This report is about what children and young people themselves wanted to say, not about ticking boxes against answers suggested by anyone else.

Second, we visited a number of children's homes (we picked these at random too) and held a discussion with the children and young people about their experiences of living in a children's home. We met the children and young people in each home as a group (though in two homes there was only one young person able to meet us). One member of our team led the discussion, while another team member took notes. We asked the same questions in each group, although of course the discussions then developed in different ways. We met most groups without a member of staff present, although in one case members of staff did sit in to support a large group.

In this report, we have set out the young people's views just as they gave them to us. We have not left out any views that we might disagree with, nor made our own comments on anything the young people told us. We have not added our own views or ideas, nor those of any staff we met. Of course some views were about the particular home a person was in at the time, and we have not left these out, but we found that young people in different homes had very similar views on many things.

The young people who gave us their views

Altogether, we gathered views from **117 children and young people, from 55 different children's homes.**

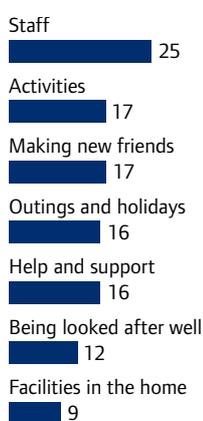
We had 87 responses to our web survey, from 47 different children's homes, and met directly with 30 children in visits to eight more children's homes, including two homes for children with disabilities.

Out of the children and young people who answered our survey, the youngest was eight, the oldest was 18, and the middle of all the children and young people's ages was 15. We know that 55 were boys and 30 girls. Seventy-five said they were white, seven said they were of mixed background, three that they were Asian, and one that they were black. Out of the 85 who answered this particular question, 14 said they had a disability of some sort. Of these, five said that they had a learning disability.

The best things about living in a children's home

The chart shows the top 'best things' about living in a children's home, according to the children and young people who filled in our survey. These were their own answers; we didn't suggest anything. As in all these lists of answers in this report, we have included all the answers that came from at least one in 10 of the people who answered the question.

Best things about living in a children's home (numbers of answers from 84 children answering the question)



The staff of the children's home came out clearly as the main thing that could make living in a home a good experience, followed by the things there are to do, friendships, being helped and looked after well, and the facilities in the home (such as TV, video, DVD, computers). Seven children said there was nothing good about living in a children's home, and one said that 'everything' about it was good.

Support and help, from staff but also sometimes from other young people, was important to many: 'staff help you with everything like education etc'; 'you're supported by staff and other yps'; 'you have loads of staff that you can talk 2 and they're good listeners'; 'the staff actually care and keep you safe'. Some wrote to us about the sorts of help they were getting: 'help me to improve my behaviour and get on better with my mom'; 'helping me to sort my life out and getting back on track'.

In our discussion groups, we heard that it is not only care staff who are important to children, but also **people working in children's homes as cooks or cleaners**. One young person on another of our visits summed up what they thought was good about the staff in their home – interaction with staff, being able to speak to them about your problems, and staff finding out information for you.

As well as being supported by other young people, some in our discussion groups told us that they enjoyed **getting to know young people from different backgrounds** in children's homes. Having **other children and young people to share interests and activities** was important to many. Children mentioned going for **outings** as a 'best thing' during many of our visits to different children's homes.

In some of our discussion groups, we heard that children and young people enjoyed having their **own room and their own space** in a children's home, which they had not had before. One group said that as well as having their own room, they enjoyed being allowed posters, pictures and books.

For many in our discussions, being given **regular pocket money** was a good thing about living in a children's home. Some groups told us that in their particular home, **the food** was one of the best things: 'lovely food!'. Whether food was a 'best thing' did vary from home to home.

Some wrote about how **things had been better for them in children's homes than back at home with their families**: 'I get more things than I would have got in my house'; 'you can't argue with your mum and dad'; 'I get in less trouble than I would at home'; 'just having a better life'. In a discussion group, one young person said: 'I would stay here if I could.'

These quotations put things neatly: 'living with other children' and 'caring environment with staff'. One person just wrote: 'You get love and protein.'

The worst things about living in a children's home

After asking about the best things about living in a children's home, we wanted to hear what children and young people thought were the worst things about it. The next chart shows all the answers that came from at least one in 10 of the 80 people who answered this question for us. Again, we didn't suggest any answers.

Worst things about living in a children's home (numbers of answers from 80 children answering the question)



Clearly, **being away from your own family is the most commonly reported bad thing about living in a children's home. The two things about the home itself that were reported as 'worst things' by more than one in 10 of the children were: having to keep to the rules of the home, and living in a group with other people if you didn't get on with them.**

Looking at the 'best things' and 'worst things' lists together, **staff are far more likely to be seen as a good thing than a bad thing about a children's home**, but staff you don't like, or who don't support you, were a 'worst thing' for 10 children.

Children listed more 'best things' than 'worst things' about life in a children's home. We were told about 155 'best things', compared with 130 'worst things'. Nine children told us there was nothing bad they could think of about living in a children's home.

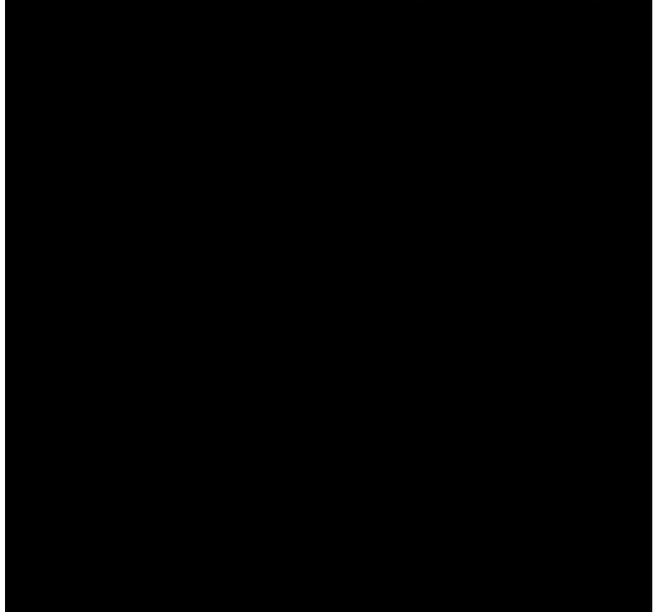
One young person summarised **missing their family and friends**: 'I'm 120 miles away from ma m8s and ma mum.' Another said, 'Any child would prefer to live with their natural parents'; and another simply said, 'I get homesick and just wanna be home.' One wrote what it was like for them living away from their home area: 'not living round my

areas and being with my pet animals and being a normal girl and having a normal life'.

Some children gave us examples of **rules they found difficult** in their children's home: 'getting sanctions and I don't get sanctioned at home'; 'can't have friends sleeping over, bed times, coming in times'; 'when I have things removed as a sanction for bad behaviour'. Both bedtimes and getting up times were seen by many in our discussion groups as being too early. In discussion groups, some spoke about feeling as if they were never trusted and were in a prison, because **so many doors were kept locked**. Some groups said that it was **difficult for children to have their friends over** to visit them in the home, which made it difficult to make and keep friends locally or from school.

Many wrote examples of how they felt about sometimes **having to live with people they didn't get on with**: 'living with some kids that you don't like'; 'other children kicking off and smashing things up'; 'living with people who do your head in'; 'the young people try and steal your personal things'. In some discussion groups, we heard that **bullying** by others in the home was one of the worst things for many. One discussion group told us that they found living with much younger children annoying, with one person saying: 'I have to go to my room to chill out.'

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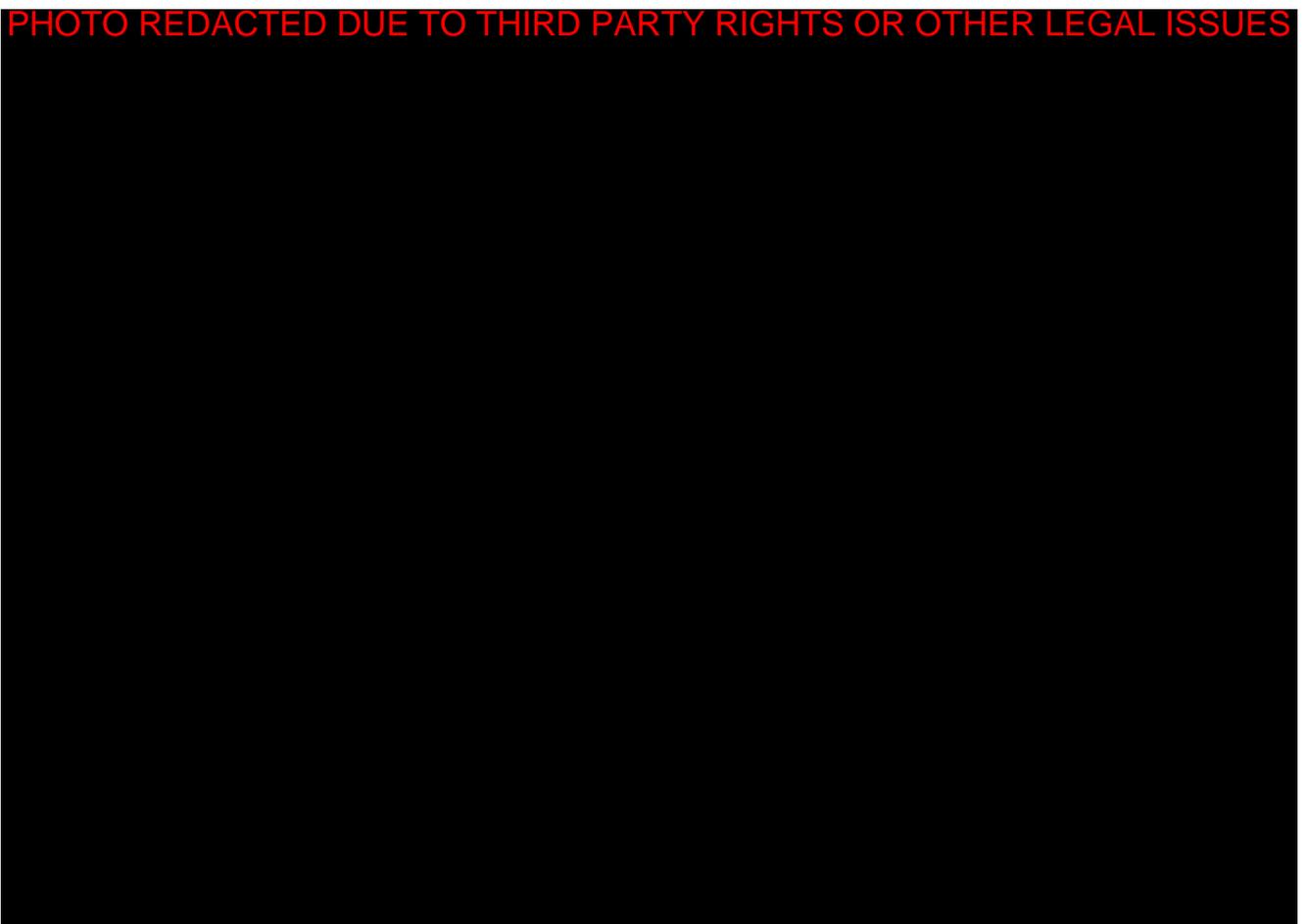


Some groups discussed how simply **living in a group of other people could be both difficult and noisy**: ‘other people in the house can be grumpy’; ‘every time I’m in bed, I can hear the TV and I call the staff from the landing and have to ask for the TV to be turned down’; ‘some young people are up all night, keeping up the other young people and adults’. One group of young people with disabilities told us they found that everyone talked too loudly in a children’s home.

Other groups told us that in a children’s home there was sometimes **not enough space** to have their own large possessions, like a bike. Some were also unhappy that they were **not allowed to keep pets** in their children’s home. In some, they were only allowed one sort of pet: ‘not allowed any animals or rabbits, only allowed fish. We each have a fish.’

Some told us more about **why they had put ‘staff’ as a worst thing**: ‘can’t trust some staff’; ‘restraint’; ‘having different staff each day’; ‘having strangers looking after at first until you get to know them’; ‘staff not listening to what you want or need’. One person wrote: ‘you sometimes don’t feel confident enough to talk to anyone because they’re not family’. In discussion groups we heard about some staff that young people – particularly older ones – felt did not spend enough time with them. In one group, children and young people told us it felt as if you were always being checked on and never trusted, because staff kept such a close eye on you at all times in the home.

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Children's home buildings

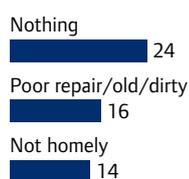
We asked what the best and worst things were about the buildings that were being used as children's homes. The first chart below shows the list of best things written by the children in our survey, without us suggesting anything.

Best things about the children's home building (numbers of answers from 80 children answering the question)



The second chart, below, shows the list of worst things about children's home buildings written by children in our survey.

Worst things about the children's home building (numbers of answers from 73 children answering the question)



Looking at these two charts together, **buildings that are big and spacious, in a good state of repair, which feel homely and where children have plenty to do are seen as good buildings to live in as children's homes.** Some children particularly like having their **own bedroom**. The answers to our question about buildings show that for some children and young people, it is the staff in it, rather than the building itself, that matter. Again **the staff looking after you can make all the difference to whether the place is a good one to live in.** It is important to note that as many as 24 children (out of 73 who answered this

question) said that they could think of nothing bad to say about the building they were living in.

Many children wrote in more detail about what they liked about their children's home building: 'it's built so people are warm and can live in a good environment that is safe and secure'; 'there is a pool table and computers and an art room'; 'it's **safe and secure**'; 'it's really nice and cosy'; 'it's clean and modern'; 'it's clean and warm'; 'it's big and got lots of space'; 'it doesn't look like a children's home from the outside'; 'I have my own room with my own personal belongings in'. Children and young people in our discussion groups also spoke of particular things they liked about their particular home – for many, this was having their own room. Some groups liked **the gardens** at their homes ('big garden'; 'easy to run around when you lose your temper'), one group liked being able to cook in the home's kitchen, and one said their home was peaceful and had a quiet atmosphere. Having **enough toilets and showers to avoid having to queue** was important to many people.

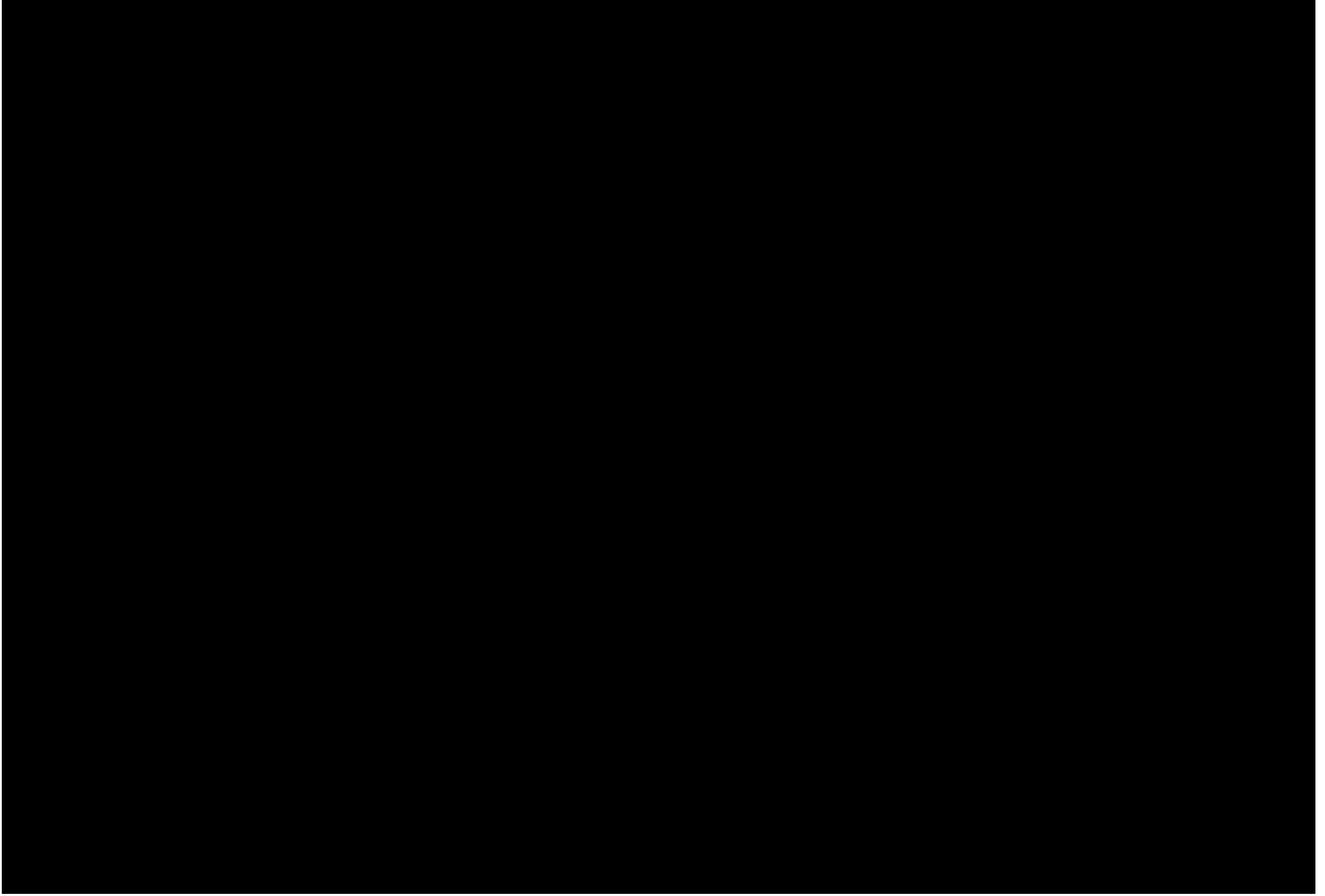
We heard from many children in the survey what they thought stopped their particular children's home from being homely: 'you can't go in the kitchen'; 'too much space, too open (open plan). I like old unit, more like a house'; 'there is a ghost in the house'; 'some of the signs up on the inside like fire escape'; 'none of my friends are allowed in and they have to wait outside which isn't very nice'; 'it's old and falling apart'; 'we have to have bars on the windows which makes it feel like a prison'; 'the big fence around us'; 'lots of children, no space'. One person simply said: 'It's a care home.'

'I have my own room with my own personal belongings in'

Five children wrote that they didn't like the fact that their children's home had **doors that were locked**. In our discussion groups, children also gave us examples of things they didn't like in their particular home, such as doors that creak when you go to the toilet at night, fire exit signs, bolts on windows and not enough heating. One group said they disliked the way their home always seemed to get untidy, however much people tried to tidy it up. It also needed 'hotter water'. Although some did not like locks, at one home, we were told that broken bedroom locks were worrying for children who had been abused and feared this happening at the home.

**'Lots of children,
no space'**

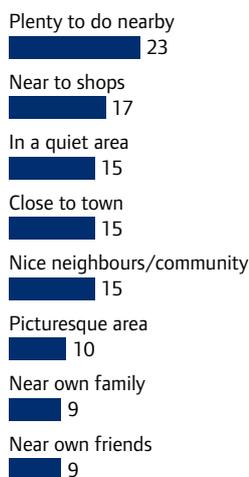
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Where the home is

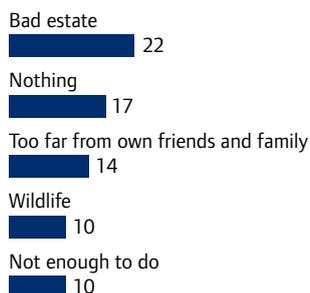
We asked children and young people what they thought was best, and worst, about the part of the town or country their children's home is located in. Again, we didn't suggest any answers ourselves. Here is the list of 'best things' which each came from at least one in 10 children.

Best things about where the children's home is (numbers of answers from 74 children answering the question)



Here is the list of 'worst things' that each came from at least one in 10 children.

Worst things about where the children's home is (numbers of answers from 65 children answering the question)



Children saw the neighbourhood of their children's home as very important – **somewhere with plenty to do and nearby shops and town, in a quiet and pleasant area with good neighbours were all good points, while being in a bad estate area was seen as a major bad point.** It is important to note that 17 of the 65 children who answered the question about worst things said that there were no worst things about where their home was. These 17 wrote many different reasons for liking where their home was, many to do with the home being close to things and places that were important to them, or with the home being in a pleasant area.

It was important to many children that their **home should be close to their own family and friends.** One discussion group went into this issue in more detail, and decided that 'it depends on what you are in care for'. Some people may need to be placed well away from past bad influences or abusive parents. Others need to stay close to friends and family.

It is interesting that 10 children said that a **worst thing about where their particular home was, in the country, was that the home was close to wildlife and farm animals.** One person wrote about 'the smell (farmer's field)', another disliked the 'smells of manure', another disliked the 'seagulls', and others wrote about 'lots of chickens about' and the 'farm and the cows'. One said, 'It's in the country. I hate farm animals.'

**'It's in the country.
I hate farm animals'**

Others commented about living in a **home that was in a remote place in the country**: 'it's in the middle of nowhere and is surrounded by fields and bushes'; 'we have to walk down dark lanes to get home'; 'there are no street lights'; 'not many people about to make new friends'. In one home we visited, the young people told us that there were no other young people living anywhere nearby for them to make friends with, only retired people or families with very young children. As with many other things, living in a remote place in the country was disliked by some, but liked by others. On another visit, we were told that it was good to be able to see nice scenery and to watch when harvesting was being done, and that looking across the hill to the lights of the distant town helped to calm one person down when they were angry or upset.

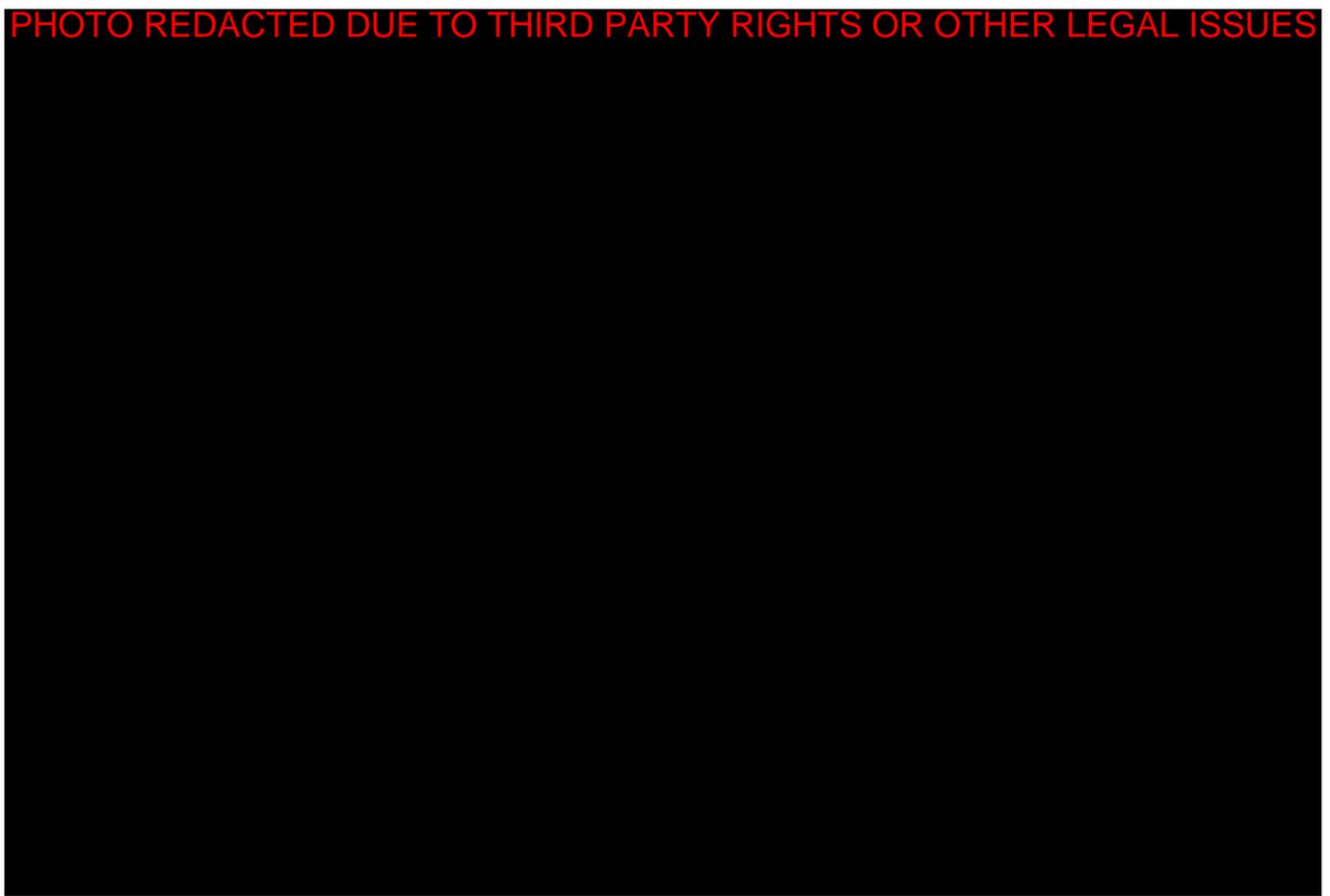
Having transport to get to town, to school, or to places to take part in activities was important to many children. Many, in both our survey and the discussion groups, talked

about a **good bus service** being important, to get to town or to activities. One said that near their home 'the buses don't run often enough'. Being only 'walking distance to town' was a good thing, and it was good if 'I can access all kinds of transport'.

Many children wrote to us about what made a neighbourhood a good or a bad one for a children's home.

Being **far enough away from places children had got into trouble** before was important: 'I am away from where I was getting in trouble'; 'I've got no bad influences around me'. **Feeling safe from the people around the neighbourhood** is important: 'safe area'; 'it's not a rough place'; 'nice neighbours'. But a bad area for a children's home might be 'racist', a 'violent area' or where 'there are loads of gangs' or 'there are druggys'.

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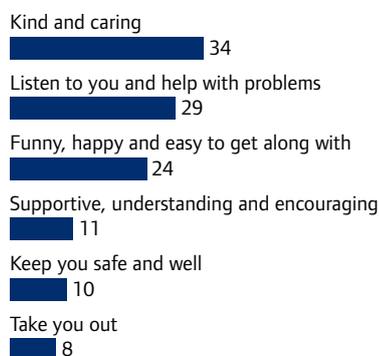


Children's home staff

We have already heard that the staff in a children's home are very important to what it is like for children to live there. In both our survey and discussion groups, we asked children to tell us more about what made children's home staff good or bad.

The next chart lists all the 'best things' that at least one in 10 children told us about their staff, without us making any suggestions.

Best things about children's home staff (numbers of answers from 78 children answering the question)



The two words '**kind**' and '**caring**' came up very often in what children wrote to us about their staff. Many good staff link this with a **good sense of fun**: 'they have good personalities and they can have a laugh with you'; 'they are kind and supportive'; 'they are caring and fun'; 'they are funny and can sometimes help you calm down'. Children liked **staff who helped them, respected them as individuals, and didn't judge them when they had problems**: 'you can speak to them about anything'; 'you can rely on them and trust them'; 'they respect you'; 'they are always there when you need them and they understand things'; 'if you want something sorted out they sort it out'; 'they never judge you'. One person wrote: 'The staff members try to work within my needs and help me do things to the best of my ability and help me work through my problems.'

In one discussion group, we heard **how important it is to have a good key worker**. A good one is 'our own special adult', and 'key carers know us deep down and can read us'. In another, we heard that it is important that staff **do not mind helping children whenever they need help, even at**

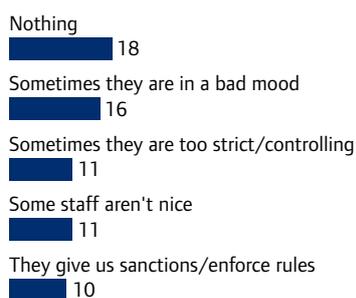
night: 'You can wake the care workers up at night and they are OK about it.'

Some children liked the fact that their **staff group had people with different personalities and ages** in it: 'staff team is made up of different kinds of people'; 'there are all different types of staff'. A few commented that their staff group had more women in it than men, but didn't think that mattered much. Others wrote about how staff could care and help in the way parents might do: 'best people who I have ever met but who aren't family'.

Some people in our discussion groups told us that they often found it difficult because **staff on duty kept changing**, so things promised or allowed by one member of staff were not done or allowed by others when they were on duty. Others in our groups, though, said that changes are a good thing since you don't spend long with a staff member you don't get on with: 'If you don't enjoy their company, you know other staff is coming.'

Of course, we asked children what they thought were the worst things about children's home staff, as well as the best things. The next chart shows the answers that came (as usual, without any suggestions from us) from at least one in 10 of the children who answered this question.

Worst things about children's home staff (numbers of answers from 67 children answering the question)



It is important to see that **18 out of the 67 children who answered this question in our web survey told us there was nothing they could say as a 'worst thing' about staff in children's homes. Children wrote more 'best things' than 'worst things' about staff in our survey.** There were 142 'best things' and 80 'worst things'.

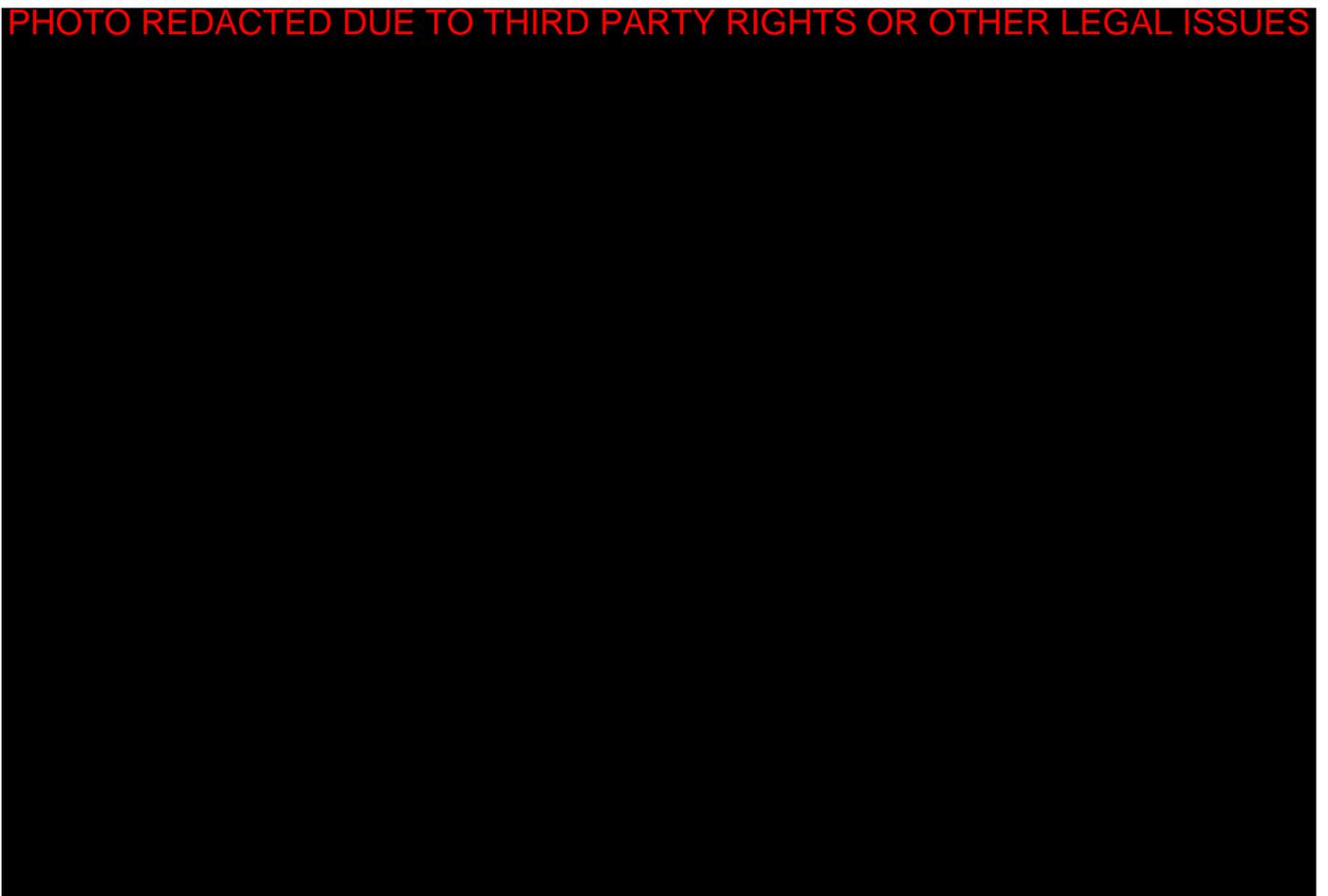
The **two top 'worst things' about staff were staff sometimes being in a bad mood with the children, and children simply not liking some members of staff.**

Children did not like it **'when they shout'**, and one summed up what many said about staff sometimes being in a bad mood: 'Sometimes staff are in a bad mood and take it out on us.' About not liking some members of staff, children said: 'u don't always get on with them'; 'I do not get on with some of the staff as they do not come across nice'; 'don't like having agency'. One said, 'They try and be like your family and they're not.'

In our discussion groups we heard some other details of what children thought made a bad member of staff. These included:

- staff bringing their personal issues to work with them
- staff who bully children
- staff who have favourites or who seem 'down' on particular children
- staff who use restraint when they shouldn't
- staff who tell children or young people, sometimes when angry, that their parents do not care about them or that they will never do well in the future.

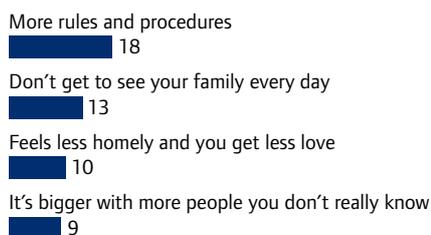
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How living in a children's home is different from living in a family

Over the years, there have been many discussions comparing living in a 'home' with living in a family – either your own, or a foster family. In our consultations with children in the past, children have often told us that it all depends on what is best for the individual at the time a decision is being made. One is not always better than the other. In this consultation about life in children's homes, we asked children to tell us how they thought living in their children's home was different from living in a family. As always, we did not suggest any answers to them. The next chart shows the differences that came from at least one in 10 of the 75 children who answered this question in our web survey.

How a children's home is different from a family (numbers of answers from 75 children answering the question)



As the chart shows, **living in a children's home can mean more rules and procedures, living with more people and some people you don't really know well, living somewhere less homely than living with a family, and having less love than you might get in a family.** In discussion groups, children and young people told us how you were much more likely to get attached to your carers in a foster home.

Comparing living in a children's home with living back with your own family, in a home you miss seeing your own family each day. One person in a discussion group told us: 'Your family drift away.'

Some more points that came in from fewer than one in 10 children were that **you could get more attention and help from different adults in a children's home than in a family**, although the people looking after you were staff rather than parents, and staff changed quite often. There **might be more activities to do in a children's home**, and you **might feel safer than you had been in some families.** During our visits, some people said they thought

you were **less likely to be moved on from a children's home than from a foster home.** On one visit, we heard that it can be easier to live in a children's home 'because in a foster home as soon as you are naughty they move you – in a children's home you can stay there even if you have been naughty'. In a different home, we heard: 'I couldn't get used to my carers as I was moving too much.' We know from our other consultations that having arguments is one of the most common things that leads to breakdown of a foster placement; in this consultation, we were told in some discussions that arguments do not become so important in a children's home.

On another visit, young people told us that **children's homes can be more crowded** than family homes, with less chance of friends visiting, more security and less privacy. From different discussion groups, we heard that **living in groups in children's homes can help to teach you to be patient and more independent** but, as always, how you got on with the staff was very important. At best, you could find a good support network and a choice of adults to talk to about things. But sometimes you might end up only trusting one particular staff member, or you could get to know and trust staff who then left the home for another job.

'Your family drift away'

These quotes are from children saying how life in a children's home differs from life in a family.

'You don't live with the same adults all the time'

'There are a lot more rules'

'The staff have to follow procedures'

'I get more freedom in a children's home than I did at home'

'Get more help here than at home'

'I'm listened to more'

'Lots more children to play with'

'You don't get as much privacy'

'When I'm at home I can spend as much time as I want in my room but here I can't, staff come and tell me that I have to come out when I have been in there for a long time'

'U can relax more in the children's home but if u had my family u couldn't - it was 1 argument and fight after another'

'I can't see my family but there is no family love here'

'I don't see my little sister as much'

'You can't trust people with your belongings'

'There's very different and more rules in a care home than being with your family. I feel that I don't get the love that I need in my care home, rather than me being with my family and getting the love and affection that a young teenager would need'

'You are constantly meeting new people which is good at times'

'Not as welcome in care as you are in a family'

'At home I don't have to help with the washing up but here I do'

'I won't get abused'

'Paperwork/Ofsted'

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Advice for any new children's home

We asked children and young people, both through our survey and in our discussion groups, what advice they would want to give to anyone setting up a new children's home in the future. We tried to find out any ways in which they thought a new home should be different from the homes they knew.

There were many different views on this. Some were about **rules and sanctions**: 'less rules'; 'not get grounded'; 'different sanctions'. One person wrote, 'they can make a rule to have a dog', and another wrote, 'have animals'. Wanting to be **allowed to have pets** in a children's home is something that other children have raised with us in our past consultations.

Many gave their advice about how they thought a new children's home should look after its children. Some wrote about **treating children as individuals according to their needs, but fairly**: 'work within the children's needs'; 'treat everyone equal'. Some wanted **a home where children did not need restraining**: 'don't restrain'. Others wrote about getting the right group of children living together: '**match the kids up better**', and about not having too many children in the group: 'don't put more than 3 kids or the child will not get lots of time to themselves'. Some wrote about having **more staff to support the children**: '1 on 1 care'; 'enough staff to try to work one on one with the young people'; 'there should be more individual time for each of the residents'. Some children wanted **both male and female staff** on the staff group: 'equal staff out with males and females'.

Some young people wanted homes to provide **semi-independent living** for older ones: 'have your own flat but on the first floor there should be a member of staff'. Some talked of the **importance of activities**: 'make it do lots of activities like they do at [my children's home]. Because then you are occupied and don't get in trouble'. It was important that a home should be near play areas and parks, and places like cinemas. One person wrote about not wanting to be placed in a home too far from their family.

A few people wrote about children in homes having **more money**. As well as 'more pocket money' generally, this was also 'more money for activities' and 'more money for birthdays and Christmas etc'.

When designing a new children's home, and deciding where it should be, children again advised '**make it look homely**'; 'don't make it scream out children's home'; 'make sure there's lots to do around the area'; 'make sure there aren't any gangs around'. Some in our groups said homes should be **bigger, with bigger gardens, more space and more rooms**. The home should have **good bedrooms, a good-sized kitchen and enough toilets and bathrooms**. Children in one group thought that a new home should have all the **up-to-date equipment needed to help any young person with mobility problems**. They also thought it important that children should be able to bring as many **personal possessions** as possible into the home.

One person wrote: '**don't have it on a bad estate**. I think it would be better if it was in the countryside but so that they can still get back into town'. One group was concerned that a home should be somewhere **away from the dangers of busy roads**. Yet another group said that homes in the future should have **less security when children are calm**, in terms of staff always monitoring children and in terms of locked doors or windows that won't open.

In discussion groups, some children said that anyone setting up a new home should first **talk to young people about what it should be like**. Others said it was **important that people from outside the home visited it often to check that it was being run properly**, and to talk to the children in confidence. One group thought that someone should do a check visit like this every two weeks, if children were going to be really safe.

'There should be more individual time for each of the residents'

Dangers to children living in children's homes

We asked what children thought were the biggest dangers to children and young people living in children's homes. Here are the answers that came, without any suggestions from us, from at least one in 10 children:

Biggest dangers when living in a children's home (numbers of answers from 66 children answering the question)



Clearly, **children in children's homes see their biggest dangers coming from other children and young people, including the danger of being bullied.** While **fires and accidents** are on the list of dangers, so are the dangers people can bring on themselves by **running away**, and the dangers of **people who are a risk to a particular child** finding out where they are. Children and young people saw a clear difference between being the victim of bullying, and someone getting hurt or beaten up in a fight.

Some quotes from what children and young people wrote show how other young people can be a risk to you: 'the risk of not knowing about the other young people'; 'other children living here could hurt you'; 'one of the residents setting a fire'; 'kids with mental problems'. Others show how others could encourage you to get into trouble yourself: 'some yp sometimes might try to egg you on to do something you don't really wanna do'; 'getting into bad behaviour with other kids'. One last quote in this section summed up worries about the dangers of people knowing where you live, and how important it is to be secure from such risks: 'Anybody can walk in and take one of us.'

In our discussion groups, children and young people went into more detail about a range of possible dangers. One

group thought that **not having enough family contact was a danger, because it made children more likely to run away** to find family members and that could be dangerous. In one group, the young people thought that children and young people can often be a major danger to themselves, and that one of the biggest dangers is people making **suicide attempts**.

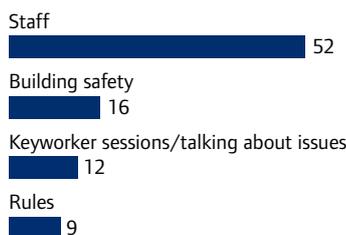
One group discussed the question of **pets** again, and decided that 'evil pets that bite' are dangerous. Generally, they thought that very small animals were OK ('a little hamster is OK but not a dog'), though they thought it good to have some contact with dogs – perhaps sometimes brought in by staff – as they might want a dog of their own when they were older. Another group was concerned that it might be **difficult to escape if there was a fire** because some doors were kept locked. Yet another group raised the question of the **danger of being hurt while being restrained** by staff. They thought staff were trained not to hurt, but sometimes they could still hurt you accidentally. A group also told us about the risk of children **messing about with dangerous things**, like knives. They told us: 'kids mess about more in a children's home because they might get hit at home', and another group said there was danger from '**peer pressure**'. Yet another group discussed the dangers of children **smoking** in different places in and around the home. One group of younger children told us that their home had lots of dangerous things in it: 'Everything is pointy.'

'Kids mess about more in a children's home because they might get hit at home'

What keeps children safe in children's homes?

We then asked children what they thought really worked to keep them safe in their children's homes. Here are the answers that came from at least one in 10 children:

What keeps children safe in children's homes (numbers of answers from 70 children answering the question)?



The message is very strong – **it is the children's home staff who keep children safe**. Other things, like being in a safe building or having rules about safety, made it to the list, but a long way behind what staff do to make sure the children they are looking after are safe.

Many children in our survey told us more about exactly what staff do to keep them safe. Discussion with their key worker came top of the list. Here are some examples of other things staff did which kept children safe, typical of many others.

'When in a fight staff stop it'

'The fire bugs get put on a fire training course'

'Staff watch you all times'

'Staff watch other children and stop anyone hurting me'

'Staff supervising you'

'Staff sleeping at the home'

'Security – people check on coming in'

'Give you ideas on how to keep yourself safe'

'Find you if you run away'

'Staff always being contactable'

'Restrain you to stop you from harming other people and staff'

'Help me make decisions'

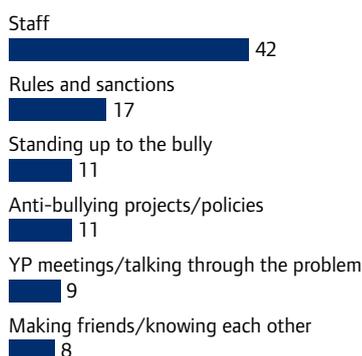
Children who wrote about **buildings being safe** told us that this included things like safety bars, locks and catches on windows, and, in some homes, working locks on bedroom doors. Some of our discussion groups came up with other things that the group thought were important in keeping children safe in homes. These included having a good **community police officer**, fire alarms, **knowing how to escape if there was a fire** (children in some homes told us they didn't think they would be able to escape very easily, because of locks on doors and windows), and **making sure children know about dangers**. One group told us that doing good **risk assessments** was very important. People in that group were very clear that risk assessments were not done well in their home. Another group told us that **being able to contact people like social workers or your own family** helped to keep you safe. Yet another group told us how **staff keep in touch by mobile phone** when children are out of the home, or coming home, and this helped to keep them safe and feeling safe.

In one discussion group, people talked about how **staff help children and young people to stay safe when they threaten suicide**, sitting with them, talking with them, making sure they eat properly, and taking dangerous things out of the room to prevent them self-harming.

Stopping bullying in children's homes

Children had put being bullied very high on their list of dangers in children's homes. We asked them what they thought really worked to stop bullying at their children's homes. These answers each came from at least one in 10:

What stops bullying in children's homes (numbers of answers from 70 children answering the question)?



Again the children and young people gave the same message – **by far the biggest factor stopping bullying is the staff at the home**. Other things stopping bullying are a mixture of rules for living together, particular actions such as meetings, projects and policies, and things children can do themselves such as standing up for themselves and making friends with other children and young people in the home.

Again, here are examples of what some children and young people wrote about how staff stop bullying.

'Anti bullying projects'

'Talking to the bully'

'Talking about problems'

'Staff supervise when bullying occurs'

'Staff being there'

'Staff and lads talking'

'No one gets away with it'

'A little person comes to the home, give them an older mentor'

'Teaching victim how to overcome the bully'

'Staff having a strong word with the children'

'Staff do not allow us to bully each other'

'Punishments and rewards'

'Education – teach you about coping with bullying'

'If they carry on and nothing happens then get the police involved'

Some children wrote about how they tried to **'stand up to the bullies'**; 'stand up to the person and say no'. They also wrote about **avoiding people and places** that might lead to them being bullied: 'staying away from them'. A few wrote about how important it is to **have friends** in a home, and that 'making friends' can be the best way of avoiding being bullied. One discussion group went further than this, and said that in their home, **making sure that nobody stood out from other people or got isolated** helped stop them from getting bullied.

In discussion groups, some thought that if someone wants to bully someone else in a children's home, then they'll find a way of bullying them. Some of our groups told us that there was no bullying in their home. Some thought that **punishments** for bullying worked, but that there needed to be stronger punishments for bullying than there usually are. One group said that **rewards like outings for good behaviour** helped stop bullying in their home. Another group told us that they had found that **support to individual children**, and one-to-one support sessions, could deal well with bullying. Some groups told us that **staff sometimes need to keep an even closer watch** on what is going on between children in a home than they do, 'because bullying isn't always obvious'.

'Bullying isn't
always obvious'

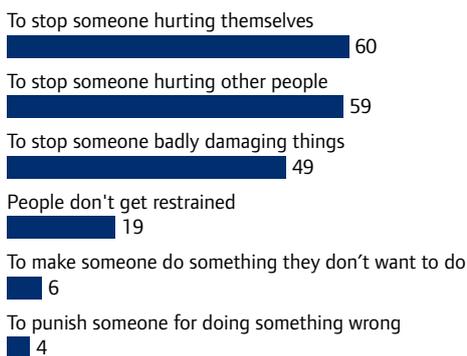
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Restraint

Children in children's homes can be physically restrained by staff if this is to stop them injuring themselves or other people, or to stop them doing serious damage to property. The national minimum standards for children's homes (the rules homes have to follow) say that restraint is not to be used as a punishment, nor to make children do what they are told to do, nor to control bad behaviour if injury to someone, or serious damage to property, is not likely.¹

We asked the children and young people to tell us about what restraint was used for in their homes. Here are their answers. This time we listed possible answers from the national minimum standards, so that we could check what children told us against what the rules say about using restraint.

Why children get restrained in children's homes (numbers of answers from 80 children answering the question)



The three main uses of restraint, by far, were the ones the rules say are OK – to stop a child injuring themselves or someone else, or badly damaging property. Nineteen children told us restraint hadn't been used in their children's home at all while they had been there. It is worrying though that **we had 10 answers saying that restraint had been used for one of the two things the rules say it must not be used for – as a punishment, or to make someone do something they don't want to do.**

We also talked about restraint in our discussion groups. We asked them why restraint was used in their homes. The people in our groups also told us that restraint is mainly used to stop children hurting themselves or someone else, or badly damaging property. Two groups told us restraint had been used to punish someone for doing something wrong, or to make someone do something they didn't want to do.

These direct quotes from children and young people show the range of different comments we received about being restrained in children's homes:

'They sometimes restrain wrong'

'They never do it to punish people'

'When some staff restrain they dig your arms into your ribs and it hurts'

'They shouldn't because if I was with other family they wouldn't restrain you would they?'

'In some situations you can be silly to come in and restrain the young person because maybe it can make matters worse'

'Never been restrained in this house. The staff talk, not restrain'

'It doesn't happen that often but it is for that person's safety'

'They will ask you after they restrained you "do you know why we did it?"'

How children's homes help with education

'The staff also say sorry for doing it'

'Young people used to try and open the door in the dark and get out but they were restrained'

'Sometimes the young people get restrained for making threats or shouting at others'

'If you are watching TV and don't want to leave, but the staff want you to, they'll restrain you so you go'

'I have not been restrained in 4 years. I used to do things because I wanted to be hugged'

'I don't think restraints should hurt... they bend your hand towards your wrist and pull you up and you scream and cry'

Two young people wrote their own assessments of the issues about restraint.

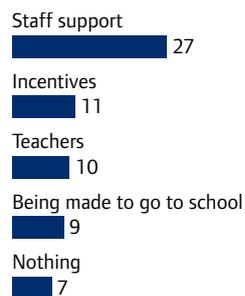
'To be truthful I think they have three reasons why, but I don't think it is fair that the children get put in a care home scared off their faces and the next thing you know you do something wrong and they tell you stop, you say nothing that they can't touch you but really you just see them coming up to you physically grabbing your body'

'I think that it is a good idea that the staff can restrain the young people to stop themselves from hurting themselves or other members and to help them not ending up getting involved with the police, some children hate being restrained, and I can hold up to that as well. But from the child's point of view it can bring flashbacks and maybe sometimes that's what they find difficult to cope with'

We asked children and young people what, at their children's home, helped them with their education. We then asked if there was anything at the children's home which they thought stopped them doing well in their education. We had **more answers about things that helped (72 answers) than about things that stopped people doing well (40 answers)**; 22 children wrote that there is 'nothing' that stops them doing well in their education, while only seven wrote that 'nothing' at the home helps them.

The chart below shows all the answers that came from at least one in 10 children in our survey about what they thought helps them do well in their education:

What helps children in children's homes do well in education (number of answers from 71 children answering the question)?



As with so many things, getting **help and support from children's home staff was the biggest help with the children's education**. One particular sort of help that some children found useful was being given **incentives for either getting to school or for trying hard**: 'There's a £1 for each day you do so if you do five full days you get an extra fiver.' Another was the children's home **staff simply making sure that children got up in time and made it to school**: 'when staff wake you up and say it's for your own good to go to school'.

Other examples of how staff helped children with their education included **linking with the school or college** when they needed to – 'staff would help by going to the college if I was having problems'; 'staff communicate between school and home via home/school diary'; 'key worker goes to parents' evening'; **making sure that children did educational work even when off school**

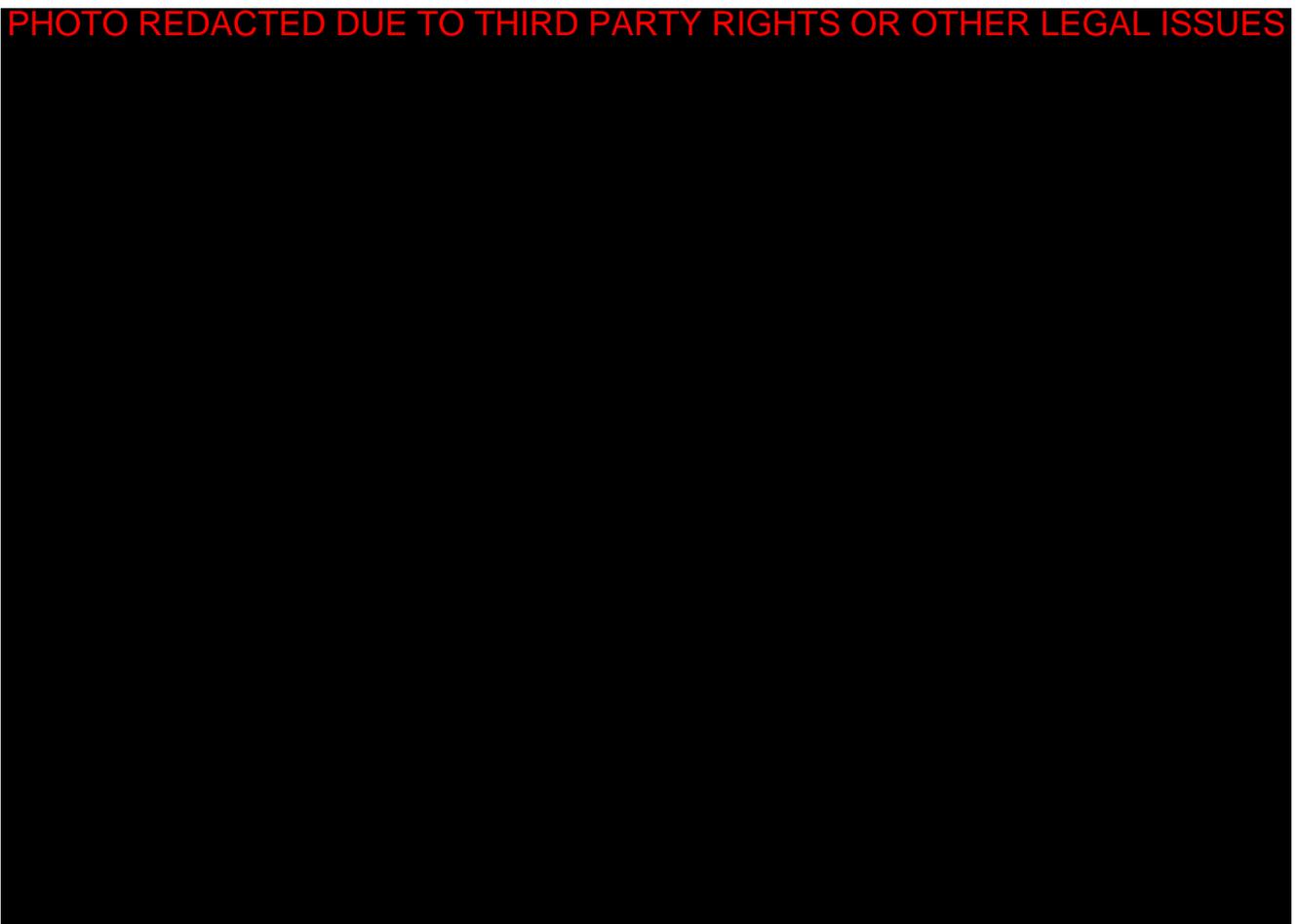
– ‘staff make you do education from 9 till 3 every day if you’re not at school’ – and **helping with homework and difficult work**: ‘People that work here help you get through when you’re struggling.’

Just **making sure children did their homework** was important. Children in one of our discussion groups said: ‘If you have homework, your real parents aren’t bothered, but here we have to show them and do it and take it in the next day.’ In one group, children told us that in their home they were not allowed to watch TV until all their homework was done (though one person did say this felt like ‘doing detention at home’).

More examples, from our discussion groups, of things that helped with education were having **educational books** in the children’s home, having a **computer** to use, having a good local **library**, and having a peripatetic **worker to go to college interviews** with a young person.

Two last quotes sum up the support staff give children in homes for their education: ‘education incentives and encouragement from staff’; ‘staff encourage me to attend school every day which I enjoy and staff help me with my homework’.

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Anything that stops children in homes doing well in education

When we asked this question in our survey, **by far the most usual answer (from 22 children) was that there was nothing that stopped them doing well in their education.** The only thing stopping children in homes doing well in their education, which came from more than one in 10 children, was **being distracted by other children or young people.** Examples of this were: 'kids play up in class'; 'someone annoys you'; 'distraction from other young people'; 'annoying youngsters'; 'other people who are not going to school'; 'late night people keeping you up when you're up early in the morning'; 'late nights staying out, drugs and lads'. In discussions, **bullying** – either at the children's home or in school – came up as one of the ways other children could stop you doing well in your education.

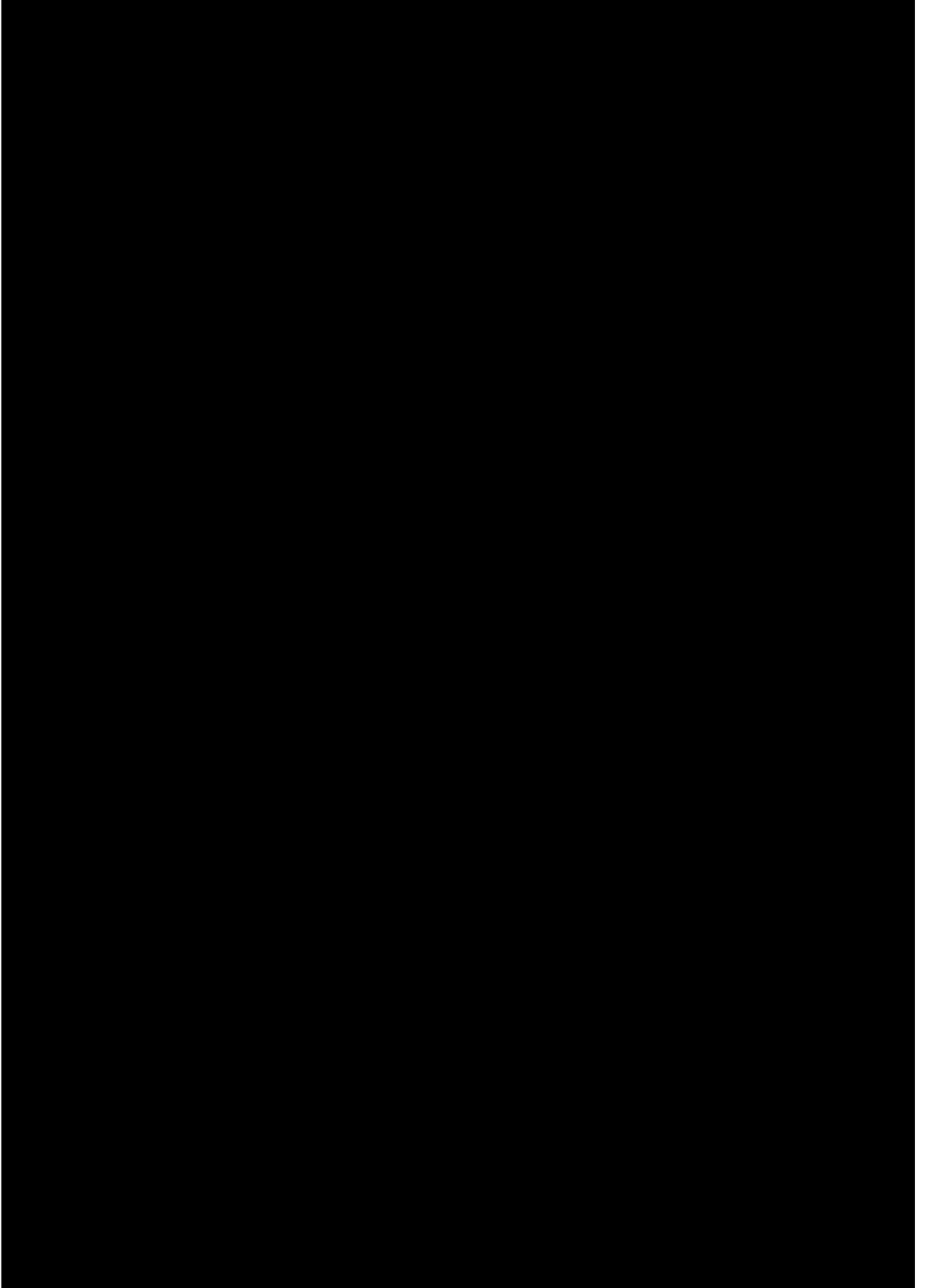
Although not as many as one in 10 wrote about **other things in their lives** stopping them doing well in education, some did write to us about this. Examples were: 'if you have family problems it may stop you doing well in your education'; 'when I fall out with my family'; 'thinking I'm going to be moved to somewhere else'.

In one discussion group, children told us that the attitude of staff was important, and some said they were put off education by **'people saying you can't do it'**, and 'people telling you what to do instead of advising you'.

Discussion groups told us that **not being able to use a computer at the children's home**, or look things up on the internet, stopped them doing as well as they could in their education. In one group, **having a long journey to school** from the home was raised as something that stopped people doing well. Some people during our visits said that **people at school knowing they are in care** could get in the way of doing well.

'If you have family problems it may stop you doing well in your education'

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Hobbies and activities

We asked children and young people in children’s homes what hobbies or activities they did, and what other activities they couldn’t do but wanted to do. The hobbies and activities written down by at least one in 10 children are in the next chart.

The hobbies and activities children in children’s homes do (numbers of answers from 76 children answering the question)



This is a very mixed list of different sorts of hobbies and activities. The clear **top of the list is doing sports** of one sort or another. The next three are very different – simply **spending time with other people such as friends and family, doing performing arts and playing games on a computer.**

The list of exactly what sports, performing arts or computer activities people did was very long and detailed, and many people listed a range of different things that they did.

Sporting activities included gymnastics, badminton, horse riding, football, swimming, snooker, pool, table tennis, rugby, fishing, scuba diving, basketball, cycling, boxing, cheerleading, climbing, trampoline, kayaking, keep fit, ice skating, netball, cricket, roller skating, golf and running. **Performing arts activities** included singing, acting and dance.

Out of 58 children and young people who answered our survey question about hobbies and activities they couldn’t do but would like to do, 35 said there was nothing they wanted to do but couldn’t do.

The others in the survey, and people in the discussion groups, gave a list of very different and very individual things. Some said they **weren’t allowed to do some activities because of particular risks to do with themselves**, which included, for some children, things

like swimming, running, fishing, boxing, paintballing or activities that involved travelling alone. Some said they were not allowed to do martial arts or karate because staff were concerned they **might learn fighting skills to use against other people**. Others told us that they could not try some activities because they had been seen as simply **too dangerous**; examples were bungee jumping, go-karting and motocross. Staff had told some young people that their **choice of hobby activity was inappropriate**, such as yoga or belly dancing. Some told us that there **weren’t enough funds** for them to take part in some activities, like cycling, ice skating, riding a moped, martial arts or horse riding. For some, there **weren’t enough staff** to take them to some things, like swimming or to visit museums. Sometimes, what people could do depended on what the staff did; one young person told us they went fishing because they could do this with the manager of the home.

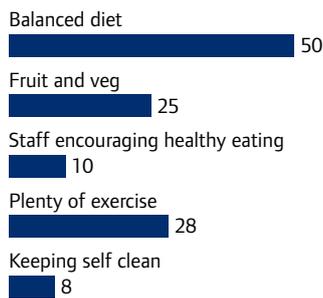
A few children told us there were things they’d like to do, but **couldn’t bring themselves to try** yet. For example, one person wanted to travel, but didn’t have the courage, and another couldn’t yet build themselves up enough to try dancing, although they would like to.

One group told us they would like the chance to do more **voluntary work**: ‘something that makes you feel good within yourself when helping someone else’.

Health

When we asked the children and young people what works to keep them healthy in a children's home, we had these answers, each from at least one in 10 of the 73 who answered this question on our survey.

What keeps children healthy in children's homes (numbers of answers from 73 children answering the question)?



The children who sent their answers in clearly saw three main things as keeping them healthy: **healthy eating, exercise and cleanliness**. Some quotes summarise how some of the children put these factors to us: 'there is always fruit provided and lots of places to walk'; 'they encourage you to eat fruit instead of junk'; 'they make sure I wash and clean my teeth'; 'self-help motivation, bathing etc'. Children saw a difference between a good, balanced diet, and simply eating fruit and vegetables.

Some children also had more **professional help with particular health problems**: 'Health worker visits help me stop smoking.' Discussion groups told us that '**doctor check ups**' and **dental treatment** helped keep them healthy. So did **staff caring for children when they are hurt or ill**: 'staff took me to the local hospital when I broke my finger'; 'if we are sick, the staff bring tablets, drinks and food to our rooms'. One home we visited had a running club to help people get enough exercise.

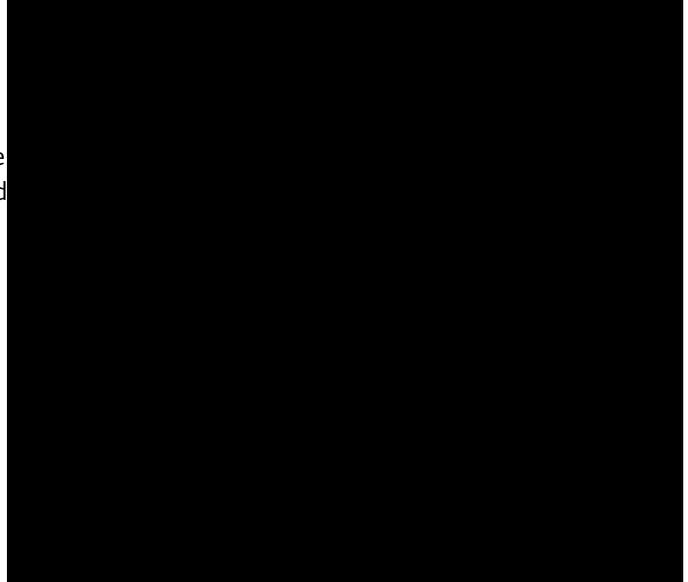
One group told us that rules about **food** helped keep them healthy: 'We don't get pudding if we don't eat all our vegetables.' Many told us that good food helped keep them healthy: 'food is good'; 'R and L are good cooks'. One discussion group wasn't too sure about how healthy the food was at their home: 'healthy and greasy all in one'. We heard from many people that their home made sure they had plenty of fruit to eat. Most homes also made sure

there were plenty of vegetables, though this was not quite as popular as fruit: 'icky vegetables'.

In our survey, 44 people answered our question about whether there was anything at their children's home that they thought stopped them from being healthy. The most usual answer, which came from 20 of these children and young people, was that there was **nothing at their children's home that they thought stopped them from being healthy. No one thing came out as a usual factor stopping people from being healthy**. Some children told us that they sometimes ate badly: 'eating sweets'; 'too much eating'; 'having chocolate in the house'; 'people eating the food before I can get to it'. One told us that it was bad when they ate badly and didn't do any exercise: 'playstation and chocolate'. Others told us they didn't do enough exercise. In one discussion group, we heard that some young people wanted to exercise to an exercise DVD, but couldn't because other people were being silly about it.

A few children told us that they **sometimes harmed their own health**, for example: 'When I get angry and stressed out I get back on the fags and self harm all on my body.' One told us that there is nothing that makes anyone be unhealthy, 'because it's our choice if we wanna take the healthy approach'. One child wrote that at their home, something unhealthy was 'ladybirds that bite'.

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Preparing for the future

The chart below shows the answers that came from at least one in 10 children and young people about what was happening in their children's homes that helped them to prepare for their future independence.

What helps children in children's homes prepare for future independence (numbers of answers from 63 children answering the question)?



The top three sorts of help children and young people told us they got from their children's homes in preparing for their independence in the future were **generally learning how to be independent**, being taught some of the **practical skills** they would need when living on their own, and, as with other things, **support from staff** as they needed it. Only eight children said they were not getting any help towards their future, out of the 63 children who answered the question in our survey.

Here are some examples given by the children and young people of the help staff were giving them in preparing for living independently in the future.

'They're putting me in my own place twice a week'

'Staff talking about my future home and making me realise futures are what you make them'

'Staff make you more independent'

'We do our own laundry'

'We can make our own way to places, walking, taking the bus, or riding our bikes'

'They tell us what to buy and what not to buy'

'Therapy'

'My chore chart'

'Staff help you get your job'

'Help with college applications'

'My life skills/independent skills which staff assist me with'

'Independent living skills – cooking, laundry, budgeting, changing bulbs, changing plugs'

'How to spend money wisely'

'Helping me with my health and getting me to smile and realise what life is actually about'

Last words on life in children's homes

We gave children and young people the invitation to say anything else they thought we should put in our report, even if we hadn't asked a question about it. Here is a selection.

'The children living here they belong with their family unless they are physically being abused'

'The staff should stop hanging off certain kids and give all the kids the same attention'

'The staff need to treat all the young people the same'

'I'm happy living here'

'Children's homes are overrated'

'Social services leaflets say a lot about the good things in children's homes, but none of the negatives'

'Most people say that being in care ruins your life but for me it's turning mine around'

'It's scary'

'Living with annoying children'

'You only get somewhere – eg on courses – because people feel sorry for you (so you can get on even if you don't have the grades). This can start bullying from peers'

'Prefer this over living with foster carers'

'I was really worried at my last review – I thought my social worker was going to move me that day'

'You need to find the right place'

'It's really good'

'I have heard about other children's homes and that they're horrible but the one I live at is great'

While this report was being written, one young person in a children's home sent us an email message through our 'BeHeard' mobile text and email panel, and this sums up what they thought people in children's homes needed in order both to enjoy life now and to prepare for the future.

'I would let all kids under the age of 15 have free bus fares and teach kids life skills like driving lessons and how to buy a house and deal with money and also let kids go free to social clubs'

The very last word in this report goes to a young person writing about their life so far in children's homes, moving from home to home.

'Life is crazy but I've lived mine bad. I hope people out there don't do the same thing but I hope you do well. The one thing I have learnt by being in care is that when you get taken away from the main thing in life that is actually a miracle is your family. I realised that when I got moved around pillar to post that I have lost the best thing that has ever happened to me (my family and pet animals). Thank you for reading my long letter'

Staff of the Children's Rights Director

Dr Roger Morgan OBE, Children's Rights Director
Rachel Cook, Head of Advice
Jayne Noble, Head of Consultation
Lilian Clay, Project Officer – Web and Information Systems
Alison Roscoe, Project Officer – Consultation
Eleni Georgiou, Project Support Officer
Belinda Panetta, PA to Children's Rights Director

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Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London WC2B 6SE

T: 08456 404040
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.rights4me.org

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