

Messages for Munro

A report of children's views
collected for Professor Eileen Munro
by the Children's Rights Director for England



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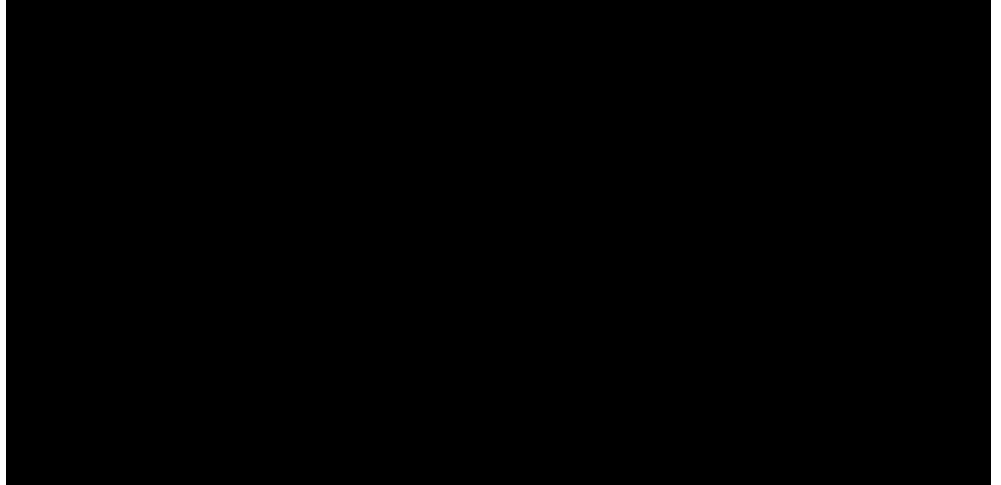


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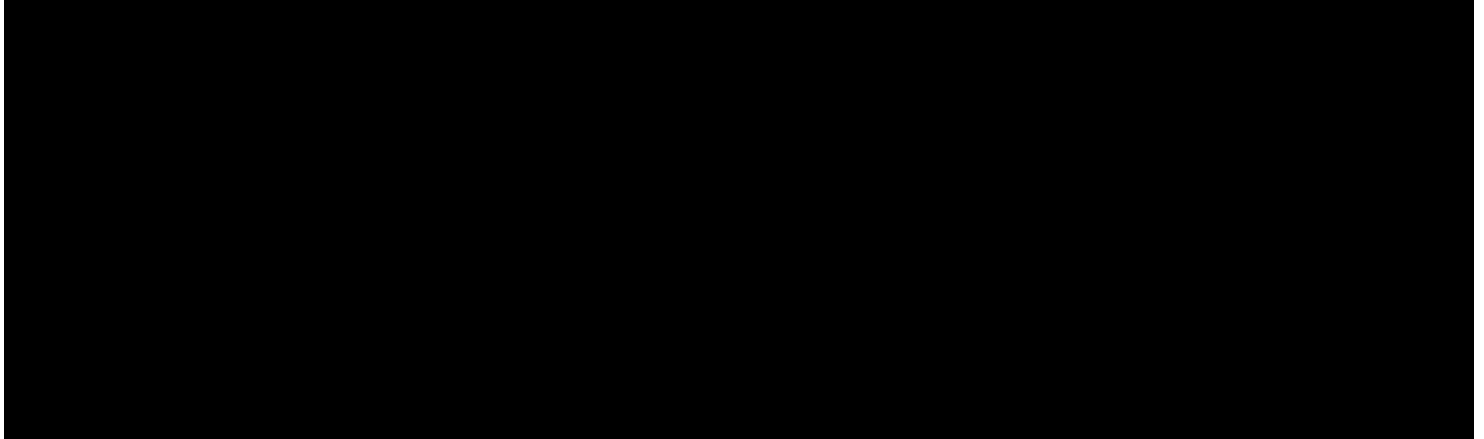
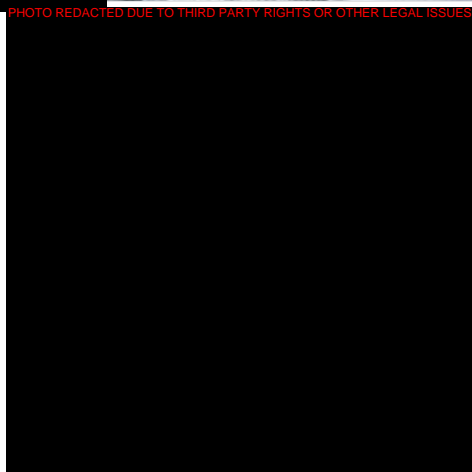
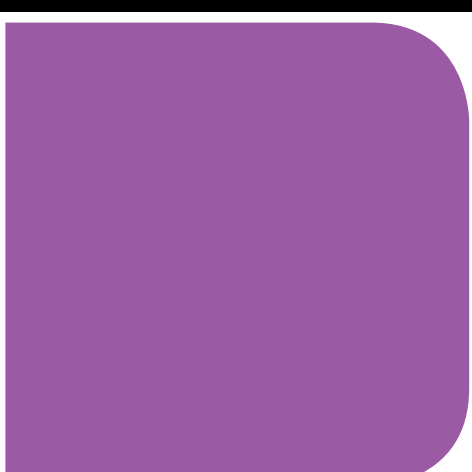


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Introduction

Roger Morgan, Children's Rights Director for England



As Children's Rights Director for England, the law gives me the duty to ask children and young people in care for their views about their rights, their welfare, and how they are looked after in England. The law also gives me the duty to ask children getting any sort of help from council social care services, as well as care leavers and children and young people living away from home in any type of boarding school, residential special school or further education college.

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

When the government asked Professor Eileen Munro to carry out a review of the child protection system in this country, I and my team consulted children and young people in care or getting social care services, and care leavers, about their experiences and views on the questions Professor Munro was looking into. Professor Munro herself was determined that children's views should be a central part of her review and she took part in our consultation events. This report sets out the evidence from the children and young people we consulted that was fed into the Munro Review.

Our reports of children's views are all written so that they can be read easily by everyone – including children, professionals and government Ministers. You can find and download copies of all our children's views reports (and a *Young people's guide to the Independent Reviewing Officers' Handbook*) on our children's website: www.rights4me.org.

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

How we asked the children for their views

This report gives the views of children in care and care leavers at three separate events held to find out children's views for the review being carried out by Professor Eileen Munro, and Professor Munro was with us at all three events to hear the views of the children at first hand.

We held the first event in September 2010, at the Department for Education in London. We invited a group of children in care and care leavers to meet Professor Munro at the start of her review work, to talk about some of the issues she would be looking into. We asked some questions of the group as a whole, and we also asked children to put views on 'Post-it' notes on sheets around the room. There were 14 children in care and care leavers in the group, which met with Professor Munro on two occasions.

Later on during Professor Munro's review, we held two separate larger events for many more children in care and care leavers to give her their views. We discussed with Professor Munro which questions we might ask at these events to give her the children's views she needed for her review. Some of the questions we asked came directly from Professor Munro, others came from the Office of the Children's Rights Director. These events took place in March 2011.

The first of the two larger events was held at the Science Museum in London, where after a meal together, children and young people took part in a voting session in the film theatre. We presented a series of questions on the cinema screen, and the children gave their answers using the buttons on electronic pads. The overall votes for each answer were then put up on the screen for all to see. Those answers are printed out in this report exactly as they appeared on the screen for Professor Munro.

Immediately after the voting session, we held a discussion forum with the children and young people with Professor Munro, chaired by the Children's Rights Director. Children and young people gave comments and views directly to Professor Munro using roving microphones, and Professor Munro responded to their comments. We then screened a 3-D film for the children and young people, and they could have a private viewing of some of the exhibitions at the Science Museum before going home at the end of the evening.

Altogether, 123 children took part in the voting session and the following discussion at the Science Museum. Even though not everyone answered every question on their electronic pads, every question was answered by over 100 children. Out of the 110 who told us whether they were a boy or a girl, 47% were boys and 53% were girls. From the 109 children and young people who told us their age, 2% were under 12, 22% were aged 12 to 14, 46% were 15 to 17, and 30% were care leavers aged 18 or over. Fifty-seven per cent were in care at the time of the voting sessions, and 40% were care leavers (105 people answered this question, but three said they weren't sure whether they were in care or not).

The next day, we held a number of discussion groups with more children in care and care leavers at Sadler's Wells theatre in London. We went into the discussion groups after sharing lunch together. With the exception of one or two supporters or interpreters for children who needed them, the only adults with the children in each group were two members of the Office of the Children's Rights Director (one to run the group and one to take notes of the children's views), and for some of the time in each group, Professor Eileen Munro or a member of her team. We were also helped by a member of the Office of the Children's Commissioner.

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We held four discussion groups at Sadler's Wells, and 46 children in care and care leavers took part in one or other of these groups. Four of these had also come to the voting session at the Science Museum.

Altogether, 179 children in care and care leavers took part in our consultations for the Munro Review.

As always in writing our reports of children's views, we have done our best to write exactly what the children and young people told us, including many quotes of their own words. We have not added any comments of our own, or from any other adults, and we have not changed or left out any views we,

Professor Munro or the government might not like or might disagree with. We are publishing this report so that everyone who wants to can see exactly what the children and young people said. You can download copies of any of our other children's views reports from our website www.rights4me.org.

After we had held our events, some people who had not been able to come to the events, or who wanted to add something to what they had said there, sent in more views to us. We have put these together and put a summary of their extra views in this report.

The first discussion group

Our first discussion group met twice with Professor Munro at the Department for Education offices in London. We discussed whether children thought social workers are bogged down by too many rules, things that carers should be able to make decisions about without having to go back to social workers, and any other messages the children and young people wanted to feed in to the review.

The group had two clear views about rules for social workers and on making decisions. They thought that **there are too many rules that say decisions should be made by social workers rather than by carers, and that too many decisions for children have to be made at too high a level in social care services.** They told us that these two things together meant that decisions that are important to children often get delayed too much, and are sometimes not made until it is too late.

Children in this group told us that they thought there were definitely many decisions that carers (children's home staff or foster parents) could very well take for the children they cared for, but which according to the rules had to go up to a social worker to decide. They also thought that the rules said that even their social workers had to get some decisions made by more senior people in social care services, and this wasn't necessary. They told us that **children in care have to get too many permissions for too many things.** As one young person put it, 'My friends just ask their mum or dad if they can do certain things. We have to ask the carers, and the social worker, and then someone even higher.' They sometimes felt that saying someone else's permission had to be asked could just be a way of saying no to something.

One major example of something that children thought rules made difficult was staying overnight with friends. They said that carers and social workers often said there was a rule that children in care can't stay overnight at a friend's house unless their friend's parents have been police checked.¹

Children in the group said that if they are being looked after by foster parents, their foster parents should be able

to make decisions for them in the same way that other children's parents do. One told us they had wanted a piercing, and this had to be sent up to their social worker for a decision. 'My mates didn't know I was in care and they kept saying, "Why won't your mum let you?" I felt terrible because I had to tell them it wasn't my mum, it was my social worker that had said no.'

Here are the main examples the children in the group gave of things that at some time their social workers, instead of their carers, had had to decide for them.

- Taking medicines or treatments
- Having a haircut
- Having a photograph taken with brothers and sisters
- Having any sort of piercing
- Having your hair dyed
- Going on holiday with your foster carer

One person in the group, who lived with foster carers, summed all this up: 'Foster carers should look after you like in a normal family and make decisions like normal parents – otherwise why are we there?'

Finally from this group, here are the further messages they gave for the Munro Review .

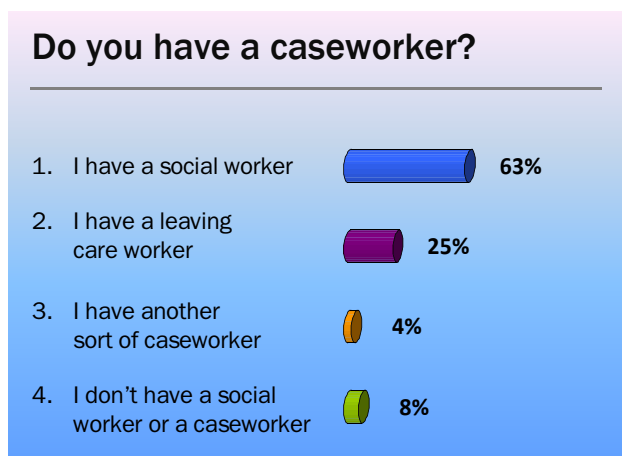
- Children in care need to be treated like other kids.
- Listen to what we say – we are not happy with care.
- Social workers do a reasonable job and get things right most of the time.
- The little things make a difference – don't let them build up so they end up being big things that are difficult to sort out.
- Don't let things drag on – it took three months to do my placement plan and I had three different social workers in six months.
- We need social workers to tell us what's happening and what we are entitled to – we often have to rely on Children's Rights Officers to tell us.
- Things happen to you and you don't know why. That just makes you feel worse.

¹ The government has never made such a rule, although it is one children often tell us has been made locally.

The Science Museum voting session

The 123 children in care and care leavers who came to our voting session at the Science Museum voted on 13 questions projected on the cinema screen. In this report we have printed the slides showing how they voted, exactly as they were projected on the screen on the day.

The first question was to find out how many had a social worker or other sort of caseworker at the time of our meeting. Here is the slide we projected just after their vote to show their answers.



Answers to this question came from 106 children.

As the slide shows, just under two thirds of the children had a social worker, and another quarter had a leaving care worker. Eight per cent told us that they didn't have any sort of caseworker at the time they met Professor Munro.

Our next question was about whether or not social workers (or other caseworkers) usually talk with children and young people on their own, rather than, for example, with carers able to hear what is being said. We know from other consultations with children in care that children want to be able to talk to their social workers without carers or other people listening in (or being able to listen in), so that they can tell them anything that is worrying them, even if it is about their carers. Government regulations also say that social workers visiting children they are responsible for should see them alone unless there is a very good reason not to.

The next slide shows the children's answers.



Answers to this question came from 105 children.

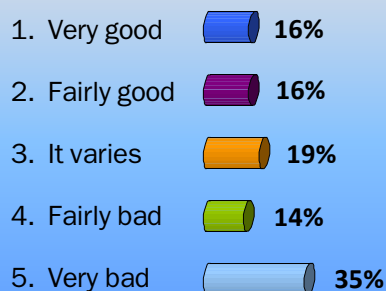
Out of the children answering this question at our voting session, only **18% said that their social worker or other caseworker always talked to them on their own, and almost as many, 15%, that their social worker or caseworker never talked to them on their own.**

Even adding together those who said their worker does this either 'usually' or 'every time', fewer than half the children and young people (42%) said their worker usually or always saw them on their own. This was the same as the number who said their social worker sometimes saw them on their own or only saw them on their own if the child or young person especially asked to see them alone.

Something else that children and young people have often told us in our other consultations is that it is very important that social workers or other caseworkers give children information they need. This was also something that had come up in our first group meeting with Professor Munro.

Our next question at the Science Museum was about this, and the next slide gives the results.

How good is your social worker, or caseworker, at giving you information you need from them?



Answers to this question came from 108 children.

Overall, the children told us their social workers and other caseworkers were not very good at giving information they needed. Out of those who answered this question, **32% said that their workers were very good or fairly good at giving them information they needed, but more, 49%, said their workers were fairly bad or very bad at this.**

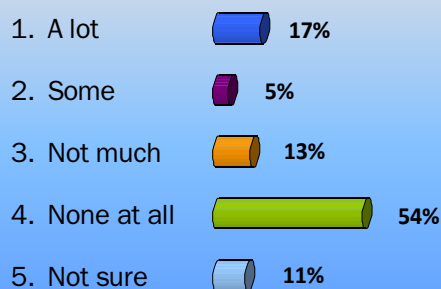
Another of the things that children and young people in our consultations often tell us is that it is very important that they are asked for their wishes and feelings about important decisions that are to be made on their lives, and that these wishes and feelings are properly taken into account when the decisions are made.

This is of course something that the law says should happen for children in care (under the Children Act 1989). Finding out and taking children's views into account is also something that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child says should happen for all children.

From our past consultations with children, we have been told that it is not only important that children's views should be asked, but that children should feel that their views do make a difference to what happens to them. Children in care have told us that this is very important to decisions about their care, and especially about the major decision to take them into care in the first place.

The next slide gives the children's answers to a question about how much difference they thought their wishes and feelings had made to the decision to take them into care.

How much difference did your wishes and feelings make when the decision was made for you to come into care?



Answers to this question came from 114 children.

The overall verdict of the children and young people at the Science Museum event was that their wishes and feelings had not made much difference to the major decision to take them into care.

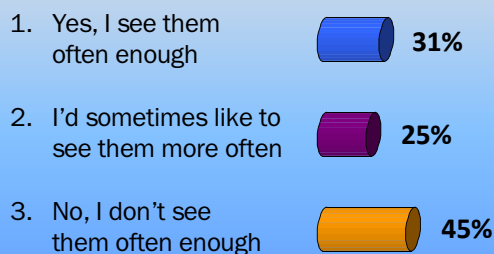
Of those that answered this question, **fewer than a quarter (22%) thought their wishes and feelings had made some difference or a lot of difference to the decision to take them into care, but 67% thought their wishes and feelings had made not much difference or no difference at all.** Eleven per cent said they did not know how much difference their wishes and feelings had made.

Something else children have often said about their social workers in our past consultations is that they want them to be easy to contact and to visit a child if the child wants them to. Some children have told us in the past that social workers often see them when there is a major problem to sort out, but not often enough to talk to them about smaller problems before they grow into major ones. This was also something that our first group had raised with Professor Munro.

There are government rules which set out by law at least how often social workers have to visit children in care, but social workers can see them more often than this.

Our next question for electronic voting at the Science Museum was simply to ask children and young people whether they thought they saw their social worker or other caseworker often enough.

Do you see your social worker or caseworker often enough?



Answers to this question came from 110 children.

From their answers, **a large majority of the children who answered the question (70%) wanted to see their social workers more often than they did. Only 31% told us they thought they saw their social workers or other workers often enough.**

Children have also said before that it is important to be able to get in touch with your social worker. The next slide gives the answers to our question about this.

Can you get in touch with your social worker or caseworker if you need to?



Answers to this question came from 109 children.

On this question, **55% of the children told us they can get in touch with their social worker or other worker, though just over half of these children said it was not easy to get in touch with them. Just under a third (31%) told us they can never get in touch with their social worker or other caseworker.**

As well as getting in touch with a worker, and getting information from a worker, it is important that children are able to get their wishes and feelings across to them. The next slide shows the answers to a question about this.

Can you get your wishes and feelings across to your social worker or caseworker?

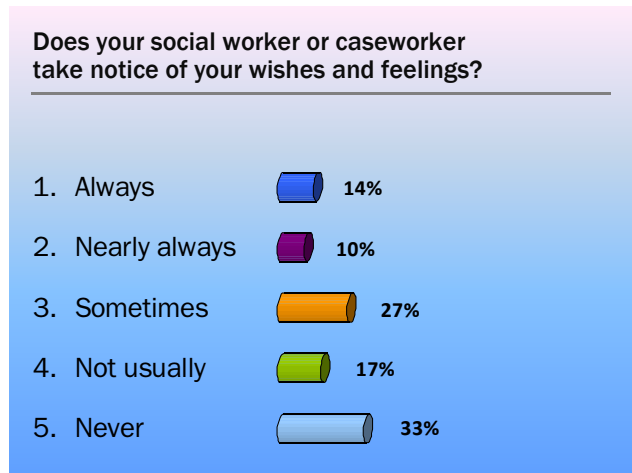


Answers to this question came from 110 children.

More of the children and young people answering this question at our Science Museum event thought it was difficult to get their views and wishes across than thought it was easy.

Altogether, **31% said they could always or nearly always get their wishes and feelings across to their social worker or other caseworker, while 46% said they were not usually, or never, able to get their wishes and feelings across. Almost another quarter, 24%, told us that they could only sometimes get their wishes and feelings across to their worker.**

Our next question was to find out how much notice the children and young people thought their social workers or other caseworkers took of their wishes and feelings once they had got them across. We had already asked how much difference the children's wishes and feelings had made to the decision to come into care in the first place. This question was about how much notice workers took of children's wishes and feelings once they were in care or had left care.



Answers to this question came from 109 children.

Exactly half the children (50%) thought their social worker or caseworker did not usually, or ever, take notice of their wishes and feelings. Only 24% said their worker always or nearly always took notice.

Many important decisions are made about children in care at their care reviews. The next question was about how far children thought they could get their wishes and feelings across to the people at their care reviews.



Answers to this question came from 105 children.

More of the children told us they could not usually get their views across to the people at their review meetings than told us they usually could. Altogether, **45% said they could not usually, or could never, get their wishes and feelings across to the people in their review meetings, compared to the 28% who said they could usually or always get their wishes and feelings across. About another quarter (26%) said they could sometimes get their wishes and feelings across in their reviews.**

These figures are very close to the answers to the question about how easy children found it to get their wishes and feelings across to their social workers or caseworkers, although slightly more said they could get their wishes and feelings across to their workers than in their reviews.

Our last question about wishes and feelings and how much difference they made was to ask the children whether they thought their views made a difference to the decisions that were made about them once they had come into care.

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Do your views make a difference to the decisions that are made about you?



Answers to this question came from 110 children.

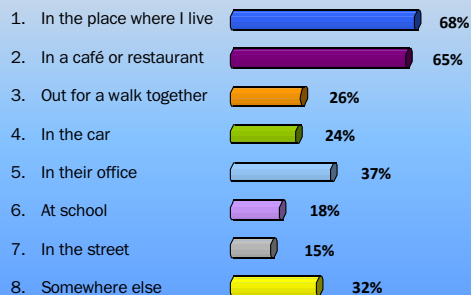
From this slide, we can see that **over half the children (53%) thought their wishes and feelings didn't usually make, or never made, a difference to the care decisions made about them, while just over a quarter (27%) thought they always or nearly always made a difference. Twenty per cent thought their wishes and feelings made a difference sometimes.**

Children's views on getting their wishes and feelings across to their workers and into their care reviews were close to their views on those wishes and feelings making a difference. Thirty-one per cent had said they could usually or always get their wishes and feelings across to their workers, and 28% could usually or always get them across in their care reviews. Twenty-seven per cent thought their wishes and feelings generally made a difference to decisions.

Knowing that children often wanted to be able to talk with their social workers or other caseworkers alone, we asked those at our Science Museum event to advise us on the best places to meet with their workers. Then we asked them to vote on good ways for professionals to find out children's wishes and feelings. Children could vote for more than one answer, and the next two slides show the results.

What is the best place to meet with your social worker or caseworker?

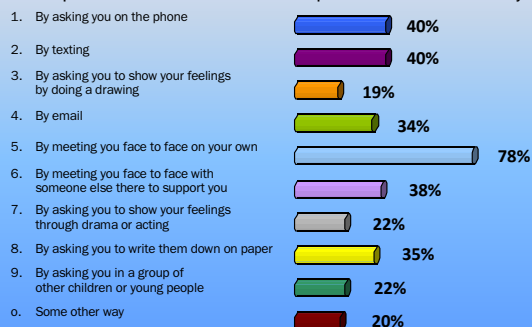
You can press more than one button to answer this question. It is OK not to vote for any of them!



Answers to this question came from 110 children.

What would be good ways for professionals to find out your wishes and feelings?

You can press more than one button to answer this question. It is OK not to vote for any of them!



Answers to this question came from 116 children.

From the answers on these two slides, the best and the least good places to meet and ways to find out children's wishes and feelings, according to the children themselves, are shown below.

Best places for social workers and caseworkers to meet children and young people

- In the place they live
- In a café or restaurant
- In the worker's office

Least good places for social workers and caseworkers to meet children and young people

- In the street
- At school
- In the car

Best ways for social workers and caseworkers to find out children's wishes and feelings

- By meeting them face to face on their own
- By asking them on the phone
- By texting

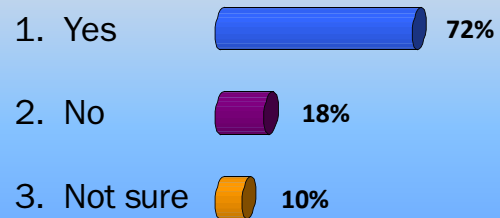
Least good ways for social workers and caseworkers to find out children's wishes and feelings

- By asking them to do a drawing
- By asking them to show their feelings through drama or acting
- By asking them in a group of children or young people

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The very last question we asked in our voting session was whether children and young people thought social workers should spend more time with children and young people. This was an issue on which Professor Munro wanted to hear children's views. Our question was about social workers, not other sorts of caseworker. The final slide sets out the answers.

Should social workers spend more time with children and young people?



Answers to this question came from 112 children.

The verdict was a very clear vote in favour of social workers spending more time with children and young people. **Just under three quarters (72%) of the children and young people answering this question voted for social workers spending more time with children and young people, outnumbering the 18% who said they shouldn't spend more time by four to one.**

Three answers stood out above all the others. These were that **the best places for workers to meet children are where the child lives or in a café or restaurant, and that the one best way of finding out a child's wishes and feelings is to ask them on their own, face to face.** It is clear from this that best of all is to ask a child for their wishes and feelings in the place they live, but without anyone else present or listening – and if that isn't possible, to go to a café or restaurant to have the discussion.

Children's discussion at the Science Museum

The children and young people who had taken part in the voting session at the Science Museum then stayed on for an open discussion forum with Professor Eileen Munro. We used this forum to give the children and young people a chance to give any messages they wanted to Professor Munro for her review.

Here is the summary of the 20 main points made by the children and young people to Professor Munro that were written down by our note-taker at the event.

The 20 points from children to Professor Munro

- Children can be scared to say some things to their social worker because these will be relayed to their carers and the children fear what their carers will say after the social worker has gone. 'How can you complain about a carer if you don't trust your social worker not to tell the carer and you are afraid of it getting back to them?'
- If you make a complaint about a foster carer, it takes too long to be sorted out, and you can suffer in the placement in the meantime – and the foster carer can be scared that there will always be something bad on their fostering record.

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- Young people with care experience should be recruited as possible social workers. Care experience can be more important than qualifications.
- It is very difficult to get hold of your social worker – they are usually out of the office and you have to talk to a duty social worker who does not take action because you are not on their caseload. It would be better for each child in care to have two social workers, so they can cover for each other when one is away and the child doesn't often miss talking to a social worker who knows them, as happens now.
- Care leavers find it particularly difficult to get hold of a social worker to give them support.
- Social workers are not always good at listening to or properly recording children's wishes and feelings, but it is what the social worker thinks that gets on to the child's record.
- When children are looked after by social care services but their parents still have responsibility for them, getting things decided takes too long. There should be a blanket agreement for everyday decisions so people don't have to keep going back to parents.
- Social workers don't make quick decisions.
- How can a child in care get another laptop if theirs has been broken or taken by someone else in the home?
- Someone leaving care can lose out on support as a care leaver if they were taken out of care before they were 16.
- Children can sometimes be taken out of a good placement for reasons that aren't to do with how the placement is going. Children living with their own parents don't get moved to new placements and dumped on strangers, as can happen to a child in care several times in their lives.
- Social workers have to spend too much time on paperwork rather than with children and young people.
- Some carers are too controlling about how children in care spend their own money.
- If you live with your own parents, you gradually learn things like cooking, but young people leaving care often have to learn all of a sudden how to be independent.
- Carers should be able to sign all school consent forms without having to go back to the social worker, which can take two weeks or more.
- If a decision affects siblings, professionals tend to ask the older sibling for their views, but not the younger ones, whose views might be different.
- You can't always get hold of your Independent Reviewing Officer when you need to.
- Foster carers can miss important problems for children in their care – for instance not realising a young person is depressed, or that a foster child is being bullied by the carer's own children.
- Foster carers need to give foster children equal love with their own children.
- Current cuts make it less likely that children will see their social workers more, as most (but not all) want to, and make it more difficult for social workers to spend more time with children, as they want to. Cuts also lead to some specialists having to go.

Children's discussion groups at Sadler's Wells

This section of the report summarises the points made by children and young people in our four discussion groups at Sadler's Wells theatre. Each of the headings below is a discussion subject we introduced to each of the discussion groups for their comments.

What should be done to keep children safe?

Children told us that keeping children safe involves having safe adults around, and as one put it, having a 'safe environment to live in with safe adults'. We were told that Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks were an important way of making sure that adults – even adults in families – are safe people to look after children. Parents and carers were particularly important in keeping children they were looking after safe. As one group put it, the safety of children is often down to 'responsible adults'.

Our groups talked about the importance of many different professionals in keeping children safe. One group said that safety is the concern of everyone who is involved with children. Some saw the police as very important to keeping children safe, and thought that children would be safer if there were more police on the streets. Many spoke about professionals working

with children and helping to keep them safe, such as teachers, designated teachers and foster carers. One group thought school nurses should be brought back.

One discussion group advised that if a professional is checking on how safe a child is, they should phone the child regularly in private to see if they are OK. Another group discussed the possibility that each school could have a particular teacher to check children's safety – someone a child could go to if they were concerned about their safety, and who would regularly see each child to ask about safety issues.

In one group, the point was made that all adults working with children should be able to see the signs of a child being abused or harmed. Social workers should be trained to recognise the signs.

There was also discussion about children keeping themselves safe, and the need for children to know about various options they could take to keep safe. Examples given were always having a mobile phone with you, and making sure people looking after you know where you are. One group said that children should always have enough credit on their phones for emergencies. Children in yet another group reported

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how making regular (perhaps hourly) mobile phone calls back home helped to keep them safe.

More generally, we heard that education and encouragement definitely help children to keep themselves safe. Knowledge and experience are keys to looking after yourself safely. One group advised that this education needs to focus on awareness, making children aware of dangers and how to keep safe. It should not be just telling children what to do, as they will often not do things they are told to do. It should give children the awareness to help set boundaries for themselves. One group said that even though children do not always take notice of information they are given, they should still be given information about keeping themselves safe: 'Information can keep you safe, depending on whether you listen to it or not.' It was also said that safety could be a subject that was made fun to learn.

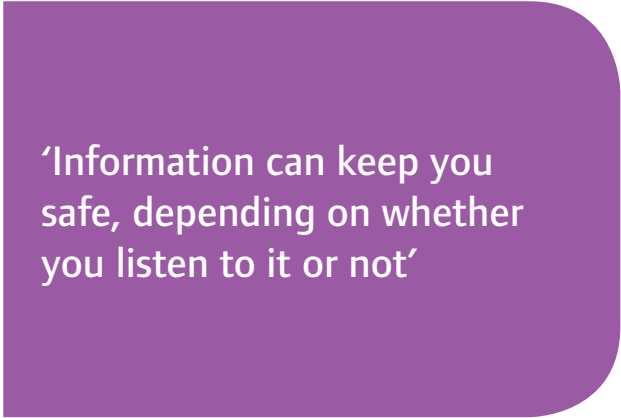
Another message from our groups was that listening properly to children, and to their worries and concerns, helps to keep them safe.

Keeping yourself safe also included keeping yourself safe on the internet. Children told us that it was important not to accept people on Facebook that you don't know, not to cause arguments on Facebook, and to clear your internet history so people who might harm you cannot track you. Children also need to know about using privacy settings.

Many raised issues about road safety, such as having traffic lights that work and more police around roads. As there are dangers when children are out and about, adults should pick children up if they are staying late somewhere, not just let them catch a bus.

We were told that the environment can make children safe or not safe. An environment where there are drug problems, or which is disruptive, can be dangerous for children.

Children also saw having help if you were in danger, or were particularly worried, or if something had happened to you, as an important part of safety. More counselling services were important, and these need to be easier for many children to get to, so should not only be located in towns. Organisations such as ChildLine and the advocacy service Voice played an important role. One child said children need 'someone secret to talk to if you are being bullied or treated badly by family'.



'Information can keep you safe, depending on whether you listen to it or not'

One young person advised that if a child is talking to someone in any service about dangers or harm to themselves, they need to be able to speak to the same person on different occasions so that person can form a general feeling and understanding of the problem, and so the child doesn't have to repeat their story many times over. It also stops their story being twisted by being passed on from one person to another when someone else picks up the case.

Finally in this section, one discussion group told us that to keep children safe, professionals need to know more about children with disabilities.

Is it easy to find someone to talk to if you need to?

This was discussed in only one of our groups. Children in this group told us that they would usually talk to their friends if they had a personal problem. While some would want to talk to someone by telephone, this depended on whether you had enough credit left on your phone. Some in the group said that they would use a website where you could write about your problems and get advice back. Some had a special buddy scheme where they were which meant you had a particular child or young person to talk to if you had a problem to discuss. Buddying schemes meant that you could talk to 'someone that has had similar experiences and they can empathise and sympathise'. Other groups talked about school 'mentoring' schemes which meant that a child could first approach another young person who had been trained and was supported in what to do and who to tell next.

It was very important that you could get hold of someone at the time when you needed to talk to them: 'You need someone that is there when you need them.'

The group made two other points. One was that having someone to talk to was important to prevent problems, and not just needed when you already had a problem. You needed access to helpful people to talk to when you didn't have a problem. The other point was that children are often taught basic skills, such as hygiene, but that some of this teaching can make you more worried about things like your health than you were already.

Another of our groups told us that parents, brothers and sisters, and other family members, especially mothers, were the most likely adults to tell about harm happening. A child might tell 'anyone who you love'. There could also be some independent people like community wardens. The group said, 'It's good to have lots of different people.'

We know from some of our other consultations that the first person a child is likely to tell if they have a problem is a friend. This came up in one of our groups for this report. One group said that if a child tells a friend and they are in real danger, then it has to be that friend's responsibility to tell someone who is able to do something about it.

What should happen when somebody has harmed a child?

The first issue raised by children in our groups was that the right people should be told about it. A child should tell their carer if someone else has harmed them, and the NSPCC was given as an organisation that should then be told. Any adult who is told about a child being harmed should have to do something about that: 'It's down to every adult.'

Children in the group discussions told us of many different people they would feel able to talk to if they had been harmed. These included not only their friends, but relatives (ranging from siblings to grandparents), designated teachers (who might be able to do quite a lot to help as that is part of their job), foster carers, social workers, youth workers, independent visitors and, again, 'buddies' in buddying schemes. In one group, teachers were added to the list, but the group thought that they were not the obvious people to go to if you had been harmed, because they had so many other tasks.

Once it is known that someone is harming a child, children suggested a number of different actions. One was to report it quickly to the police. Another was to punish the person who had harmed the child: 'they should go to jail'; 'they should be punched back'. Another was to help and support the child who had been harmed. Yet another was to take the child to somewhere they would be safe. Foster carers could often be a safe place to go for a while.

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It was important that action is taken quickly after a child has been harmed. If a child has been harmed by somebody, they could do it again. One group told us that action should be quicker, smoother and more efficient than children in the group had experienced so far, so that a child is not left suffering for as long as they had been. We also heard that in telling people what has happened, only those people who have to be told should be told.

The action that would need to be taken could include getting a restraining order on a person who has harmed a child, or making it harder for them to have any more contact with a child. If the harm is at school, the child should be moved to a different school if needs be. In order to decide on the action to be taken to protect the child who has been harmed, it will usually be necessary to investigate what has happened.

Children discussed the issue of removing a child from a family where they have been harmed. They told us that this decision needs to be made separately for each child. Sometimes it may not be necessary. It may be possible to remove the person who harmed the child, for example if the child has been harmed by a step-parent. Sometimes it may be safe to keep the child in the home, but with someone from the council visiting often to check on what is happening. Moving a child out will of course cause the child other problems, such as losing friends and family, being scared of coming into care, and feeling alone because they have to get on with their life more alone than before. Children who have been harmed might find it particularly difficult to have their lives disrupted by having to leave home as well. It may still be necessary though, as one group put it, to move a child out in order to 'remove the child from the risk'.

One group was concerned that if it is decided that nothing should happen after a child has told of harm, or there is not enough evidence for action to be taken, the situation should still be closely monitored. One child summarised this for others: 'Don't just think because nothing was proved that it's OK for the child to be at home.'

If the child who has been harmed and has to be moved out has brothers or sisters, one group told us that all of them should be moved together – it is wrong to separate siblings. Another group said that if any child has older siblings in care, then the local authority should always check on the younger siblings still at home.

One group thought that the person who has carried out abuse needs to be helped so that they don't do that again.

In deciding what action to take, one group told us that if one child has been neglected somewhere, all the children there might need to be removed, even if they haven't yet been neglected.

Most of those in our groups thought that it was also important for the child to be consulted directly about what action should be taken after they have been harmed. They should be given options, and unless they are too young, they should be asked if they want to move before they are moved somewhere. However, one group warned that it may be necessary to decide to move very young children even without asking them, and that a child may still need to be moved but be too scared to say that they want to move. Another group told us that some children wanted to be able to have a say in what happens once they have told an adult they are being harmed, but that other children wanted the adult they told to take charge and do whatever was necessary.

'Don't just think because nothing was proved that it's OK for the child to be at home'

In one group children advised that a child should be able to ask an adult what they would do if the child told them something serious before deciding whether to go ahead and tell them. They should keep having a say in what happens next, and they should be able to go back to the same adult if things get worse in order to ask them to take further action.

Children in our groups thought that children who have been harmed need help for themselves. They may need counselling. They may need the help of a psychologist. One group told us that help for a harmed child needs to come quickly. In their experience, 'some people wait ages'. They may just

need somebody they trust to talk to. Children in one group thought this could be someone like an Independent Visitor. Children told us that it is always important that someone they trust keeps explaining to the child what is happening. This can be done by someone the child didn't already know before. One group said that the child might need somebody to speak on their behalf to social care services, and to explain things to the new social worker when their social worker changes.

Our groups talked a lot about how people should talk with children who had been harmed. Children advised that they should be able to talk to someone in confidence, and that there should be discussions about different things that might be in the child's best interests, not only about the major question of whether or not they should move.

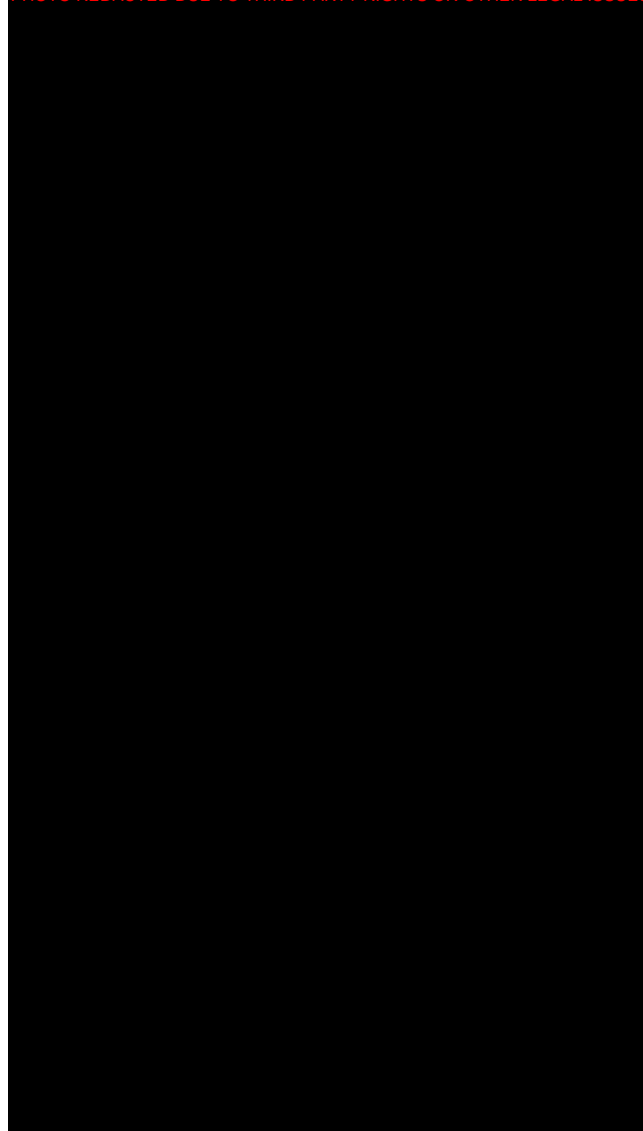
What would help children to tell someone if they are being harmed by somebody?

We heard that children don't necessarily tell people if they are scared. They may also not tell anyone if they are afraid they will not be believed. They may also be afraid that if they tell one person, then 'it'll get out wider'. Knowing that the person you tell will have to pass the information on will put some children off telling anyone. Not knowing what will happen next can stop some children from talking. Being scared of telling an adult, especially a professional adult, makes it more likely that a child will choose to tell a friend if they are being harmed.

Two of our groups quite independently told us that there is a tendency for professionals to believe adults more than they believe children. This can be dangerous if it leads to a child being sent home when home is unsafe. All sides of the story, including what children say alongside what any adults say, should be fully looked into.

A rather different point from one group was that a child needs to feel able to tell someone about being harmed while it is actually happening, and not wait until it is all over. Some children may feel safer saying

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something about what has happened rather than about something that is still happening, and some may need a long time to think about it before they tell anybody. We heard that telling when it is not happening may be less likely to be believed, because it is more difficult to investigate anything and any marks on the child for adults to see are not there any more. Some children told us that many people go through it for years and later on nothing can be proved.

The children told us a number of different things would help them to tell someone about being harmed. One was that the person they could tell was someone they already knew, trusted and were friends with. One group said it would help children if they knew they could speak to someone like this in confidence. One group was clear that before they told anyone they were being harmed, they needed to know that they were going to be believed and that they would get support afterwards.

‘You can’t expect us to tell them things when we don’t know them. Trust is something you build up’

It was also important for social workers to be easier for a child to get hold of. Many told us that social workers are usually very busy people and not available in the office when children call them. ‘Just being there’ is important to a child wanting to tell about harm.

We were told that an important part of trusting an adult before you tell them about being harmed is that you trust them not to pass on information they don’t need to pass on. Some in our groups were worried that they could not always trust social workers never to pass on information that is confidential but not needed for safeguarding. If that has happened in the past, then the child is less likely to trust their social worker again, even with safeguarding information.

Another thing that would help was the setting they were in and how the discussion was held. The place it happens was important, and children told us it was easier to talk about harm somewhere that felt informal and casual, without big formal tables. It was important that the people you talked to were not wearing uniforms and badges, and did not have lots of paperwork with them, as these things put children off talking freely. In one group we were told about talking to someone you know and trust in a place it is easy to talk in: ‘they should try to take you out to... places that children are comfortable in. They need to get to know us. You can’t expect us to tell them things when we don’t know them. Trust is something you build up.’

One group said that children should have different ways open to them of telling someone, including using email and a website, as well as talking to someone face to face. Some children find it easier to write down what has happened than to talk about it. Another group suggested that the child could write a diary, or record what they wanted to say on a video. Others suggested having an anonymous helpline or a blog. Some children told us that in their school each child had an email address to tell their teacher if they had any major problems. Others in our groups thought this was a good idea, because it is easier to tell something in a quick message than to have to confront a teacher face to face. However, one group told us that if a child has been physically harmed, it might not just be a matter of telling someone; the child might need to show bruises or other injuries to someone too.

In one group we heard how some children are afraid to tell someone outright about being harmed. Instead they try to leave hints for people to pick up for themselves. One said they might write about it in a diary that they then left open, hoping someone would see.

Another help discussed in our groups was to have something to do to distract you and put you more at your ease while you were talking. Many different things were possible – having something to fiddle with or squeeze, being able to draw or create something as well as talking, or being given some chocolate to eat.

For very young children, being able to communicate things by drawing, writing something down (for example like a letter) or putting something on a computer could all help. If a translator was needed, this could be especially important if the child is very young.

We were also told in one group that there were some things that professionals had done which had immediately put the child off trusting them and talking to them. One was calling the child by someone else's name.

A different group thought it was important that the child should feel they can keep some control over what happens next if they tell an adult professional about being harmed. They thought professionals should ask the child what they want to happen and discuss it – 'not just do it'.

'It doesn't matter if you tell people, nothing will be done'

Two of our groups told us that in their experience children are not always listened to or believed when they do tell someone about being harmed. One child said, 'It doesn't matter if you tell people, nothing will be done.' Another said that children are often not believed if they tell someone that a carer is harming them: 'They don't believe what kids say. They find it hard to believe that they'll harm you because they hired them to look after you.'

How can very young children be helped to understand what is going on when professionals are making decisions to keep them safe or after they have been harmed?

One group stressed that with a very young child, it is even more important that everyone tries to make sure the child feels comfortable. There is no one way of doing that – it depends on the child.

Children in our groups said that as with all children and young people, being asked and told things by someone you trust is vital to understanding what is happening, and having your say if you can, if you are any age, including very young. If someone else is telling you things, having someone the young child trusts in the room and helping is important. There should be different ways available for the young child to communicate, at the level of the child.

One group said that very young children need professionals who are experts at communicating with very young children. In a different group, we heard that if a very young child needs to be interviewed by the police, it may help for an adult they already have a good relationship with to be involved in asking them questions and telling them things, not just police officers and social workers who are strangers to the child.

Just as older children would find it helpful to have something to distract them while talking, we were told that very young children would actually find it helpful to have toys to play with while things were being explained to them. This would help them to feel more comfortable. Young people told us that young children need activities to do as well as talking, and adults talking to them need to be trained in getting young children to open up while they are doing activities.

One group suggested that a very young child might sometimes feel more comfortable talking to an older child rather than to some adults.

If a very young child is going into care, one group suggested that it might be helpful for an older child already in care to help explain some things to them that they might need to know. It would also be helpful to tell them positive things, for example about a new bedroom they can have, as well as anything worrying. It would help too if they are taken to visit where they are moving to before they move there.

What should be done to keep children in care safe from harm?

Our groups did think there were some particular things that were special risks for children in care. One was that parents who might harm a child in care might be trying to find them. Another was that carers might not be able to cope with emotional and behavioural difficulties that many children in care have. Training for carers in how to cope with these would be part of keeping children in care safe, as well as helping carers to do their job. Sometimes carers need to tell children in care what is right and what is wrong to do to keep themselves safe. A different group advised that if children in care are in trouble, they should naturally have support available from the care system in everything they do. They may not be confident enough in themselves, and should be given help to be more confident if they need it.

Children in care have many problems that other children may not have. We heard that part of keeping a child in care safe may be protecting that child from the effects of what has happened to them in the past.

We were told that keeping children safe is the job of many care professionals. These include social workers and foster carers. But it went beyond this to elected councillors and the government, who children said both have a special job to keep children in care safe.

‘You can use a mobile phone if you get into trouble, like in the park. If someone follows you, you can ring someone to pick you up quickly’

In doing their job of keeping children in care safe, we were told that professionals need to be good at making relationships with children in care, and at communicating with them, keeping children’s information confidential and keeping promises to children. In our groups, children told us that frequent changes of social worker, social workers having their decisions for children overridden by managers, children not being able to get in touch with their social workers, and professionals not turning up to appointments they have made to see children, all damaged the vital trust and relationship that there needs to be between professionals and children to keep children safe. Children told us that they each need a few different people they can trust and go to if worried about something.

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In one group, the suggestion was made that young adults who had been in care themselves should work with children in care, because children in care would find it easier to discuss harm with people who had been in care themselves.

Given the importance of mobile phones in keeping children safe, two of our groups quite separately advised that everyone in care should have a mobile phone. One younger child gave an example of how this might help if they were in danger: 'You can use a

mobile phone if you get into trouble, like in the park. If someone follows you, you can ring someone to pick you up quickly.'

In one group, we heard that regular health and eye checks for children in care are important, and show that someone cares about your health.

A key issue that came up was the importance of listening to children in care. Children who do not feel they are listened to may well start to harm themselves, or perhaps develop eating disorders. Some need the help of someone who specialises in dealing with self-harming problems. It is also important that the child can communicate easily with their carers, without the problem of child and carers speaking different languages.

Three of our groups told us that children in care are often kept safer than many other children, though they don't always agree with how this is done: 'Young people in care are a lot more safe. You're not allowed out. Every door has two locks and you can't open the windows.' Another group thought that some of the ways adults try to keep children in care safe were wrong. As examples, 'we're not allowed our photos taken. I had to sit out of a class photo because teacher didn't get permission from my social worker. I think that's really unfair'; 'kids in care can't go to a sleepover'; 'I lost a lot of friends because parents have to be checked'. Yet another group said that children in care tend to rebel against these limits being put on them – and end up putting themselves in more danger as a result.

One group was concerned that leaving care can be a risky time. Young people can be made to leave care at an early age and may rebel against the protections they have been under, while they still really need protecting. One young person said, 'When "your" child is 18 they get a car, we get kicked out!' Another said that in her experience she was over-protected while in care, and not allowed to stay with friends or go on holiday. Then when she was 18 she had to do things on her own that she didn't feel confident about. For their own safety, young people need training to leave care, and to leave care gradually not suddenly. Also, a care leaver does not have the safety option of coming back home if they can't cope, as many other young people do. Leaving care at 16 or 18, when many young people live at home with parents into their twenties, is not safe.

What questions should social workers ask you, to really find out how you are being looked after?

The groups made some general points and then supplied specific questions that should be asked.

One general point was that questions need to be asked in depth and the questioning needs to develop according to what the child says; the social worker should not just go through a list of standard questions. One person summed this up for many when they said, 'It shouldn't be a set of questions. They should start with how is life, a general question, and then build on it.' One example we were given was that asking a child about their schooling shouldn't just be asking 'how is school?', but using a first question to open up a discussion in depth with the child. Children should be asked about their placements in the same way.

Another general point was that social workers need to be trained in the sorts of questions children and young people would like to be asked, and that children and young people should be involved in providing this training.

Children also made the general point that as well as the social worker visiting the child to check that they are being looked after properly, it was important that the child could get in touch with their social worker if they felt they needed to tell them something or discuss something with them. It was suggested that children should always be given their social worker's mobile phone number to call or text them, that social workers might be accessible to children on Facebook, and that social workers should tell all the children they are working with when they are going to be away on leave.

A final general point from some people in our groups was that social workers should look at certain things each time they visit a child, as well as talking with the child. Examples would be the child's bedroom and the clothing the child has to wear.

Set out below is the list of specific questions children and young people across the groups put forward for social workers to ask to find out how they are being looked after. Taking the children's general points into account, these are meant to be 'starter questions' for more discussion, not a list of single questions to work through.

- 'Are they treating you right?' – followed up to see if there is any abuse or neglect.
- 'How is school?' – followed up with in-depth discussion.
- 'How is your placement?' – followed up with in-depth discussion.
- 'How are you getting on with your foster carers?'
- 'How are you getting on with other people?'
- 'Are there too many people in the house?'
- 'Do you have enough contact with your family, including your siblings?'
- 'Is there enough funding for your contact with your family?'
- 'Can you keep in contact with any siblings who have been adopted?'
- 'Are you having to move placement or school because of funding cuts?'
- If the child has gone to a new placement, 'How are you finding the rules and regulations in this new placement?'
- 'Does the food meet any dietary requirements you have?'

A final point on this from one group was that social workers need to be very skilful at checking whether foster children are being treated in the same way as a foster carer's own children. Some foster carers can 'put on a show when social workers are around'.

What should social workers ask you so that they can find out whether they are giving you the support you need and doing what you want them to do?

We wanted to find out what children thought they should be asked to check that social workers are doing the right things for them.

'You don't want to be using big words to a little one, and talking slowly to me'

The major point made by all our discussion groups was that it is not just important that social workers ask them if they are doing the right things, but that they actually do take action on what the children tell them. This is vital, whether they are answering a survey about the help they are getting or being asked directly by someone in person. One child said, 'I kind of wonder what happens when we tell them things.' On surveys, one (like many others) said it is important to 'take notice of the surveys they give us', and another told us, 'I filled one in to see if anyone will call me, and no one did.' One child said they had been told that after children had filled in a survey about whether they thought they were getting the right help and services, 'they put them in a box and pick one up sometimes to compare'.

One key question children put forward for social workers to use to find out whether they were helping children in the right way was to ask whether there are any improvements they need to make in what is being done for that child. One group told us that it is also very important that social workers ask children about their services in a way that they can understand, but without patronising them or confusing them: 'You don't want to be using big words to a little one, and talking slowly to me'; 'don't patronise and talk down to teenagers'.

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More points about social workers

In discussing social work and how social workers can help to keep children safe, children in our groups told us more about the sorts of people they thought would make good social workers for this task. The key points that came up in different groups are listed below.

Social workers keeping children safe need to be:

- Trustworthy
- Qualified
- Able to share information appropriately
- Experienced
- Not trainees
- Good listeners
- Responsible
- Not short-term staff
- Caring
- Good communicators
- Good at empathising
- Understanding of children's issues
- Good at explaining what is happening
- Good at explaining when something the child wants to happen will not happen
- Able to communicate well with children whose first language isn't English
- Able to avoid asking the same question over again
- Ready to answer children's questions
- Able to know when children don't want to talk about something
- Available to children and seeing them often
- Willing to take action rather than putting things on file
- Parents with children of their own if possible

Children's views submitted from Herefordshire and Hounslow

We are adding summaries here of two reports sent in to us by local authority staff on behalf of children they had discussed our questions with in their own local councils.

The first report came from a discussion with seven children and young people in Hereford, who were unable to make it to our discussion group event at Sadler's Wells.

Views from the Hereford County Council group

Here are things different people can do to help keep children safe

Social workers

- Make children aware of dangers
- Be more protective of primary-age children
- Keep an eye out for dangers – but don't 'namby pamby kids'
- Do more home visits and see children are OK
- See the children away from their family
- Don't ask parents if you can speak to the children
- Do fun activities so the child will open up

Teachers

- Check that children are eating at school and aren't too hungry
- Talk to parents and build a relationship with them
- Don't tell the parents what a child has said – it could make things worse
- Be someone I can trust
- Don't tell other teachers what I've told you
- Be someone that deals with it straight away, not six days later
- Be careful how you word things – don't wind up parents the child has to go home to

- Look for children who are withdrawn or who start bullying others
- Don't get too friendly to try to get children on your side

Other people in the family

- Go to the school if the child is bullied
- Be there for the child
- Advise the child
- Look out for signs – for example if the child is hungry or dirty
- Call in out of the blue and look around the house
- If you think children aren't being fed – cook them tea once a week

School counsellors

- Give children advice on how to deal with things
- Give leaflets and phone numbers of helplines

Friends

- Stick by you and help you to be happy

Friends' parents

- Be on the lookout
- Give kids a break from their home
- Invite them round to tea
- Build up trust so the child might tell you if something is wrong

Health visitors

- Chat to parents – build up a relationship with them
- Communicate with social workers
- Call round out of the blue
- Look round the house
- Look in the fridge and cupboards

Nursery staff

- Keep an eye out for children
- Say something to social care services if a child is dirty or hungry

Doctor

- Tell people if you're concerned
- Do more home visits to see what the home is like

Police

- Keep an eye out
- Share information
- Pop into schools so the kids get used to you and trust you
- Interview children wearing plain clothes – have your badge with you

Parents

- All parents should have to do a parenting course
- There should be parenting lessons in school for everyone

The Hereford group said that if somebody has harmed a child, a family support worker should support and advise the family while the police investigate and a school counsellor counsels the child. Social workers should try to prevent a child needing to come into care by giving them skills to keep themselves safe, and teachers should keep a close eye on children and help them to catch up if they fall behind at school because they are stressed. A friend's family might support and offer respite care to the child, but the child should have a say in where they go.

The Hereford group also thought that it would help children to tell someone if they are being harmed if every school had a 'worry box' and a number children could text with worries was widely publicised – for instance, in fast food restaurants and on toilet doors. Schools could also have a drop-in group where children could raise worries, and children could keep a 'feelings diary', read by their teachers.

The group thought that to help very young children keep safe, each child could have a 'keeping safe' book to read and re-read, there could be cartoons on TV about keeping safe, professionals should use the right language for the child, and they should make sure children understand that it's not their fault if they are abused.

As well as ideas that we have already listed in this report, the Hereford children suggested that looked after children should have a peer group to support them, and that Independent Reviewing Officers should check up on children in care by seeing them regularly.

The group added some further thoughts to the questions already listed in this report for social workers to ask in order to check that children are safe. Their additional questions were: 'do you feel happier than you did last time I saw you?'; 'talk me through a typical day for you'; and 'tell me one good thing and one bad thing that is going on for you at the moment'. To find out whether the social worker is doing what they need to do for the child, they should ask, 'who gives you the support you need?' and 'what else can I do to help you?'

The Hereford children also talked about the time they first came into care. Examples they gave of the best things about coming into care were having their own bedroom, feeling safe, not being beaten up any more and learning how to behave better. They said what should have been done better was their social worker seeing them more often until they were settled, having more contact with their siblings and being rescued years earlier than they were.

The group made many of the points about social workers that are already in this report, but added that they should know about the law and about the life of children in care. Their final proposal was that when children are talking about their bad experiences, they should be allowed to swear because they might be expressing a lot of anger.

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The second extra report was from staff in Hounslow telling us what children in care and care leavers in that London borough wanted to say to the Munro Review.

The children and young people who contributed to the Hounslow report made two major points. First, they advised that all professionals working with children in care and care leavers should be given compulsory training delivered by young people, to get them to see the care system from the young people's point of view. They had experience of delivering such training themselves using the 'Total Respect' materials.

Their second major point was that there need to be ways for foster children to say what they think about their foster carers, without the fear of that putting them in a difficult or awkward position. They were concerned that if they raise any negative points about their foster carers, their social worker will tell the foster carers. They said this fear is causing children, especially younger or less confident ones, to stay quiet in placements where they are unhappy.

Hounslow added to their report that in this time of cuts, neighbouring councils should work together more to deliver services, and to share the best bits of what they do.

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