

Children on the edge of care

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

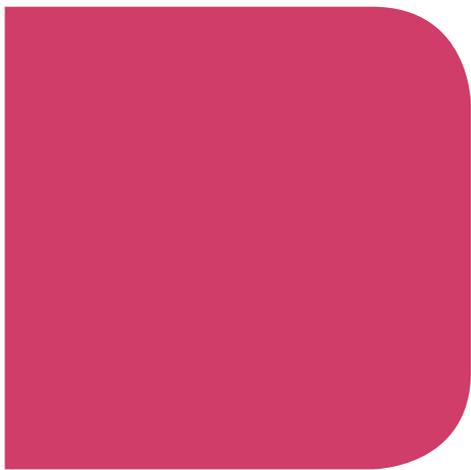
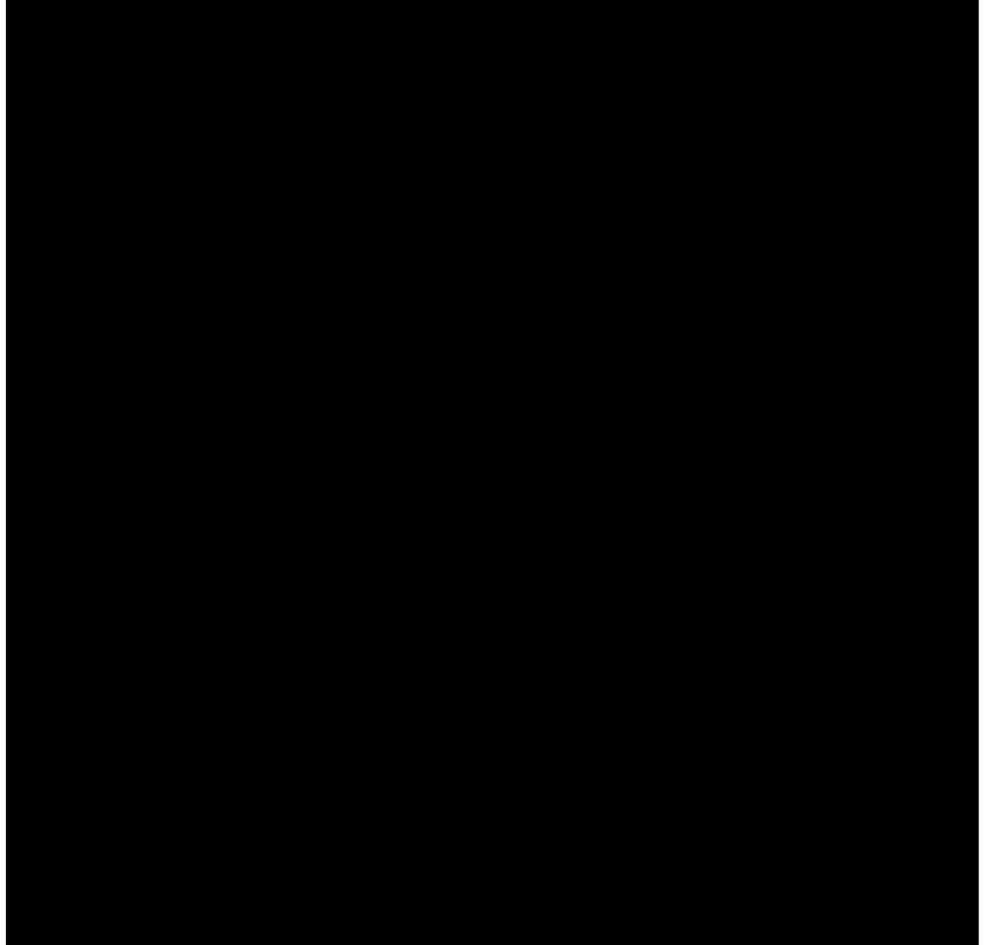


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Introduction

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.

One of the things the government is looking at, especially in these times of limited money, is making sure that the children who come into care are the ones who really need to come into care, and that children do go back home from care if that is in their best interests, rather than just staying in care. The government calls this working on the 'edge of care'. This report is to find out children's own experience and views about both parts of this work – coming into care and going back home from care. What the children told us will be fed in to the officials at the Department for Education who are carrying out work on the 'Edge of Care' policy.

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 on our children's website: www.rights4me.org.

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

How we asked the children for their views

To find out what children and young people thought about coming into care and about going back out of care, we invited children and young people in care or who were care leavers to come to any of six consultation sessions we held in three cities in the country, London, Liverpool and Newcastle. We sent invitations for children to attend to each of the local authorities around each of those cities.

At each city we held two consultation sessions. At the first, we asked children and young people to answer a number of questions we projected on to a large screen. They voted for the answers they wanted to give by using electronic voting pads. We were able to show them the overall pattern of answers just after they had voted on each question. Only children and young people were able to vote, and they were able to use the voting pads without us or the carers who had brought them being able to see the answers they were giving.

For some of the questions, children and young people were asked to pick just one answer. For others, they were asked to vote for all the answers they agreed with from the list we put up on the screen. A member of our team explained the questions as they appeared on the screen, without giving any suggestions about the answers being right or wrong, and also read out the answers and how to choose each one, to help any child who was not able to read easily what was on the screen.

The second consultation session at each of the three cities was made up of discussion groups, and each child or young person was invited to join one of these groups. Each group was led by a member of our team, with another member of the team taking notes. Officials from the government's Department for Education who were working on the government's Edge of Care programme joined us at all our consultation sessions, and sat in on some of the discussion groups to hear first hand what children and young people had to say. Parents and carers were not with the children or young people in the discussion

groups, to make sure that the children could speak freely and entirely for themselves.

Each of our consultation sessions was held at a place that was interesting for children and young people to visit, and a meal was provided at each one for children, young people and carers. We gave the children and young people a high-street voucher as a thank you for giving us their views.

In this report, we have set out the findings from all the voting sessions added together, and have only given percentages where at least 100 children and young people answered a particular question. We have also set out all the key points from all the discussion groups, added together. Where a point was made in just one discussion group, or by just one child or young person, we have said so. Where we have put a child or young person's exact words in this report as a quotation, we had their permission to use their words, and what they said was a clear summary of what others were saying.

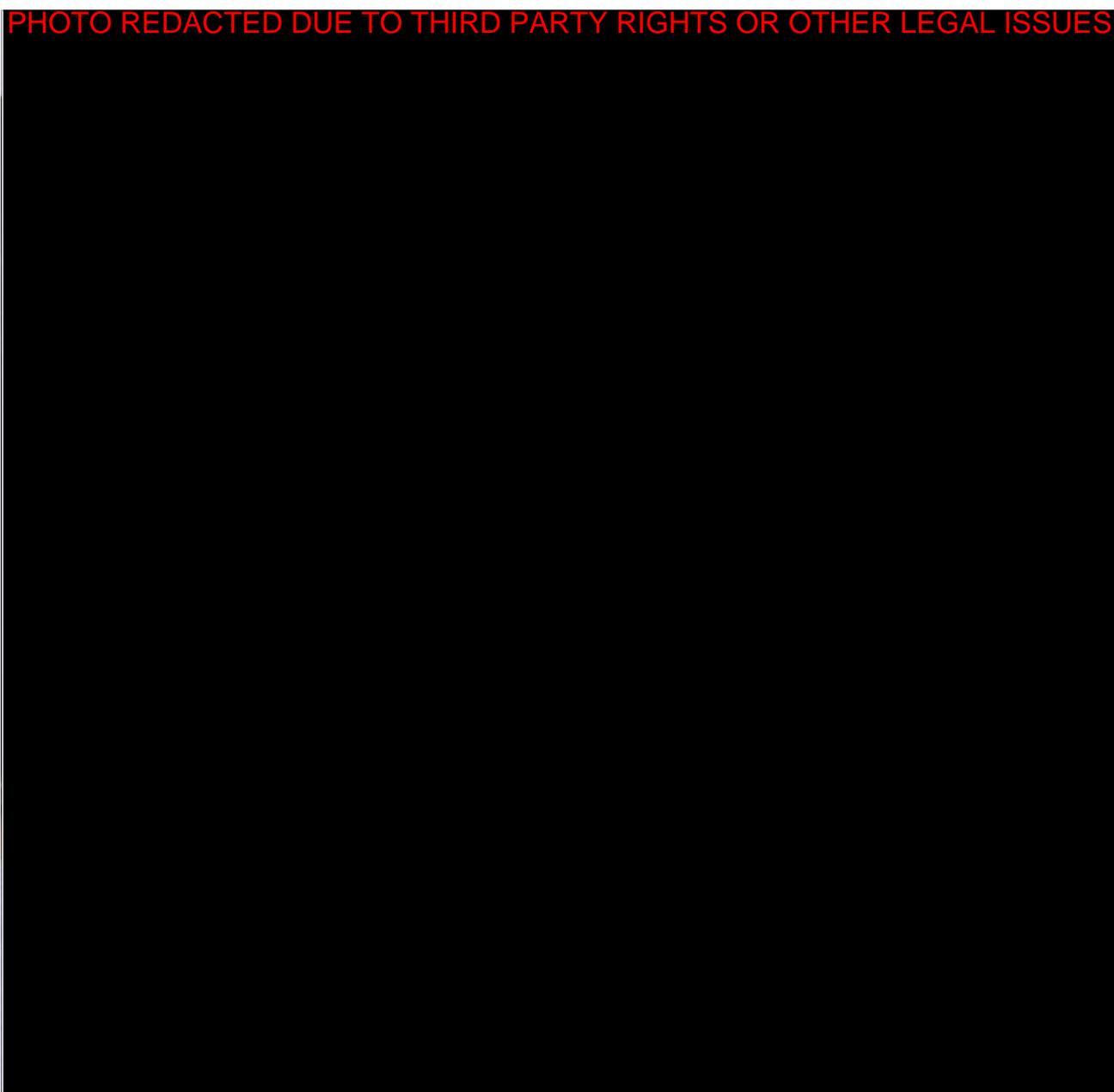
In this report, we have not added our own professional comments or views, and we have not left out any views from children and young people that we or the government might disagree with. As with all our reports of children's views, we have done our best to write this report so that it can be read easily by children themselves, by professionals working with children, and by politicians. A copy of this report, and of all our other reports of children's views on different subjects, can be downloaded from our children's website, www.rights4me.org.

The children who gave us their views

Altogether, 122 children and young people voted at our three consultation events. A total of 110 children and young people took part in one of the 11 discussion groups we held in London, Liverpool and Newcastle. All the children were either in care or care leavers.

A hundred of the children who came to our voting sessions told us which age range they were in. Twenty-one per cent were aged 12 or under, 68% were aged 13 to 17, and 11% were care leavers aged 18-plus. Fifty-one per cent were boys and 49% were girls. A total of 23% told us that they had a disability, and 19% told us that they were asylum seekers.

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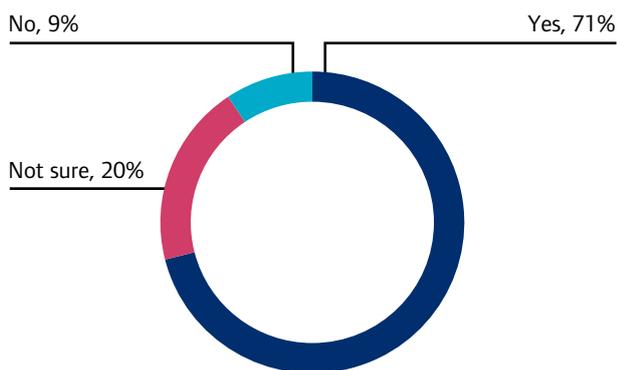


Keeping children out of care

The first part of the Edge of Care programme is to find ways of stopping children from having to come into care if they don't really need to, and to make sure that the children who do come into care are the ones who definitely need to. We asked children at our consultation sessions a set of questions about whether they thought they needed to be in care, and what might have kept them from needing to come into care.

The first question at our voting sessions was to find out whether children and young people understood why they had been taken into care. Figure 1 shows the answers from our three voting sessions, added together.

Figure 1: Do you understand why you were taken into care?



Based on answers from 107 children and young people.

Just over seven out of 10 children (71%) definitely understood why they had come into care, and fewer than one in 10 told us they did not understand why they were in care. As many as one in five, though, were not sure about this.

In our discussion groups, we asked children when they thought children should always be taken into care, rather than left living at home with their families, even with support. Our groups said that **sometimes parents just cannot look after their children, because they are on drugs or have alcohol problems, are too deeply involved in crime or have a serious disability, or they might be abusing, assaulting or hitting their children – or a child's parents might have died.** Abuse could be verbal, physical or sexual. It could also be punishing you in a cruel way, such as locking you up in a room, or you could be badly bullied at home: 'If you're bullied at school and you get bullied at home, you're going to have an unhappy life.' A parent needing to spend a lot of time in hospital, or with an illness such as serious depression, might also be unable to look after a child properly. Any of these would be reasons for a child having to go into care. A child who has been trafficked into the country would have no parents here and would need to come into care.

Some groups said that children may have to come into care **if their parents simply don't have enough money to look after their children.** They may also need to come into care if they are being neglected or their parents are not providing them with the things they need, like enough food, or if they are not taking the child to school.

From our group discussions, it was clear that children thought that **major family problems, danger to a child, and parents not keeping their children safe, were good reasons for taking a child into care.** They said domestic violence was one family problem that should usually lead to children coming into care if it involved any danger to them. Another example of a family problem that might lead to a child needing to come into care was a serious fight over the child between their parents after a divorce. Prostitution was also given as a reason for a child needing to come into care. One group thought that a child might need to come into care if they were

seriously scared to be living where they were living, or if their own home was simply an unsafe place for a child to be.

These things did not always need to lead to coming into care, though. **Sometimes something could go wrong without parents meaning it to, and they might be all right again later. It all depends on how good the parents really are at being parents**, and a child might need to come into care if there are 'bad parenting skills, when they don't cope with situations properly which could have been sorted out'.

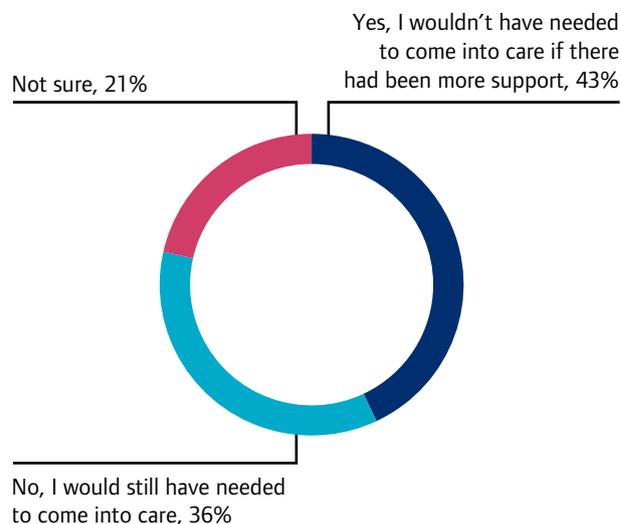
Children could be put into care for the wrong reasons, when something has gone wrong but it really is not the parents' fault. In one group we were told that a child might need to come into care if their parents simply did not love them.

One group told us that **sometimes a child might need to come into care because of the way they themselves behave**. Their parents might need time away from their children because of this. We also heard in one group that some children might need to come into care if they were being a danger to themselves while living at home.

We heard from one group how sometimes children will put themselves into care, because they want to do better (for example, in their education), and they know that their parents cannot give them a better future.

Figure 2 shows the answers to our next question at the voting sessions. This was to find out whether children thought that they might not have needed to come into care if there had been more support beforehand for their families and themselves.

Figure 2: Would more support for you and your family have stopped you needing to come into care?

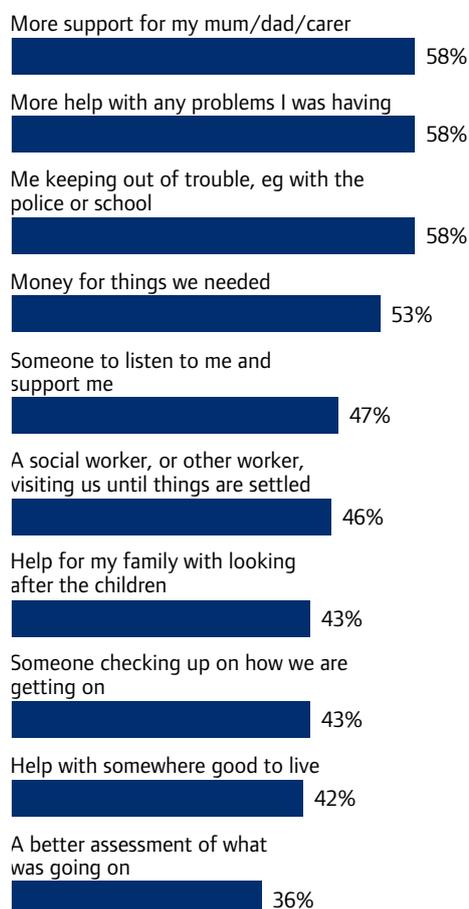


Based on answers from 107 children and young people.

Taking the answers from all the children at our voting sessions, just over four out of 10 children **(43%) thought that if there had been more support, they would not have needed to come into care**. Just over a third of all the children (36%) thought that even if there had been more support to them and their families, they would still have needed to come into care. **The number who thought more support would have kept them out of care outnumbered those who thought that they would still have needed to come into care even if there had been more support.**

We asked the children in the voting sessions to tell us which (if any) of 10 different things would, in their view, have kept them out of care. They could vote for more than one answer. Figure 3 shows how they voted on this.

Figure 3: Would any of these have kept you out of care?



Based on answers from 106 children and young people.

Four very different things came top of the list of what the children thought would have kept them out of care. Each of these was chosen by more than half the children who voted on this question. **Top of the list of things the children thought would have kept them out of care were more support for their parents or carers, more help with the child's own problems, the child managing to keep out of trouble, and help with money for things the family needed.** Two of these are support professionals could give, one was something children would need to do themselves to stay out of care and one was financial. It is important to note that the children did not just say that other people needed to help them more or give them help with money – they said just as often that children themselves needed to keep out of trouble to keep out of care.

In our discussion groups, we talked more with children about what children's services could do to help keep children and families together, so that children did not have to come into care. Their ideas included **better communication between families and social care services, practical help for parents with jobs like keeping the house clean, group meetings to support parents and children together, social care services giving families a break rather than taking the children into care, guidance on parenting for parents who aren't very good at it, practical and emotional help with caring for the children, and help with money if the family doesn't have enough for what it needs.** Another idea was that if parents do have a job, they could be given help by someone else looking after their children at their workplace.

One group was concerned that social care services should be careful not to interfere where things were basically OK for the child. Another group made much the same point, telling us that sometimes young people are taken into care too quickly, and that there should be the possibility of sorting things out before that happens. Yet another group told us that sometimes there is not much that social care services

can do to help keep a family together, and that some families simply do not want to be supported: 'You can offer help, but if they don't want it there is not much you can do.'

You can offer help, but if they don't want it there is not much you can do

One person summarised what others said in a number of groups when they said, 'Social services should be willing to help parents as well as young people.' Parents might need special help and support if they were looking after a child who had a disability or a mental health problem. Others, in different groups, said that it was important that social workers visited families often, because it was hard to get things done if you didn't see the social worker very often.

We were told that **social workers needed to check up and offer support often**, once or twice a month or more. It was suggested in one group that they should also check how things are going, and what help was needed to keep the family together, by having regular one-to-one discussions with each adult and child in the house. They should also check that parents were giving children what they needed, such as enough clothing. If they weren't, or spent their money on the wrong things, some thought social care services could help by buying things for them. Some children told us that an independent visitor, rather than a social worker, could visit to check on things and give advice the child and their parents needed. For some families, the support they needed might

be family counselling, or someone from outside the family to come in and help the family talk things through, or a family support worker (which one person described as like getting help from a 'Super Nanny').

We also heard that **it is not enough for social workers to say that a family needs help and support, and to refer them for this. The help and support needs to come quickly**. If a family needs urgent help to keep a child out of care, children told us that it can be a long time after a referral is made before help actually happens, and things can get worse in the meantime: 'Help needs to come quickly.' Appointments for services to help families also need to be at times the family can manage, and need to be often enough for things not to go badly wrong between one appointment and the next.

If a child is behaving badly and their parents can't cope, or is misbehaving at school, special support could be given at school 'so you don't just sit in the teachers' office all day'. This might need to be one-to-one help sessions. Outside school, it was important that there were **enough activities and youth clubs** for children and young people to help keep them from needing to go into care because of their own behaviour.

We heard that **respite care, giving everyone a break from a difficult family situation, could keep a family together**. The child or young person could go to a foster home or a children's home for a short period, and 'respite would give all the people in the family a break – so they won't explode'.

There was a clear view in one group that **bringing a child into care is very costly, and it is worth spending some money on giving the family financial support, or on giving them enough special help and support, in order to keep a child out of care**. If this works, it is likely to be cheaper as well as better for the child and their family.

Returning children home from care

Given the government's work to see which children in care could go back to their birth families, we asked children in our discussion groups whether or not they agreed with the idea that children's services should do their best to return children in care back to their parents. Many children told us that **it all depends on the situation**. For some children, going back to their parents is simply not the right decision, while for others it should be the plan in time. **Each family would need to be fully assessed individually, with both the children's and the parents' views fully and separately taken into account – including whether the child actually wants to go back, and whether the parents actually want them back.**

Children advised that the assessment needs to cover whether a return home is to the benefit of everyone involved and whether there are still dangers to the child. It also needs to cover what the reason is if the child does not want to go back home, whether the parents are ready to take full responsibility for care of the child and what support the parents need to look after the child again. It needs to check how parents have been doing in any rehabilitation or treatment they have been having (for drug problems, for example), whether the family has changed enough for the child to go back, whether any illness problems have improved, and whether there are still any drug or alcohol problems in the family. For the child, it needs to look at the emotional health of the child, how long the child has been in care and how settled they are in care, and how attached the child is to their current carer.

An idea from one of our discussions was that the children and their parents might stay somewhere safe together to help find out what is going on and whether they are ready to go back home together again.

We heard from one discussion group that going home may not be something that can really be considered for many of the children in care whose parents live in a different country.

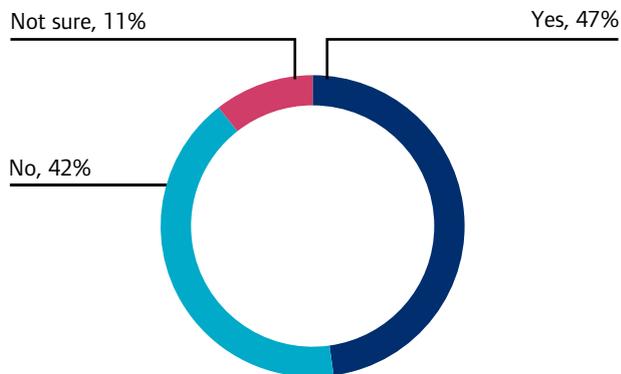
A quote from one child sums up what most children said to us when we asked if children's services should do their best to return children in care back to their parents. They said, 'Yes – but it always depends.' Another quote, speaking for many others, was 'Yes – but they should also keep an eye on them.' Children told us that if children are wrongly sent back home, they could be hurt. As one child put it, **'If you are in care it is for a good reason and if you go back, you could go back on the same track.'**

Whether or not to go back home is a difficult decision, and the young people in one of our groups warned us that children in care do not find it easy to decide whether or not they want to go back home. Different children from the same family, brothers and sisters, may have different views about it. Some children need help in deciding whether they want to go back home or not: 'If you want to, you should get help to decide whether it's the best thing or not.' If a child does not want to go home, they shouldn't then be made to: 'Can't push them into it.'

One group gave us a warning message. They were worried that children are likely to be sent back to live with their parents instead of staying in care simply to save money: **'They put you back with your parents to cut costs, but this may not be best for the young person.'**

Part of the Edge of Care idea is to see if some children can safely leave care again and go back home, but along with this goes making sure that children do stay in care if they need to. Our last question in this section was to ask the children in our three voting sessions whether, in their view, they needed to be in care now. Their answers are shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Do you think you need to be in care now?



Based on answers from 113 children and young people.

More children had a definite view about whether they should be in care now than they did about our questions on understanding why they had come into care, or whether more support might have kept them out of care. **Just under half the children (47%) thought they needed to be in care now. Almost as many (42%) thought they did not need to be in care now.** These are important figures for the people working on the Edge of Care project to take into account.

As Figure 4 shows, over four out of 10 of the children in care at our voting sessions thought that they did not need to stay in care, it is important to consider whether many children in care could return home – if that is safe, in their best interests and subject to their wishes and feelings.

Our discussion groups talked about when it would simply not be safe for a child to go back to live with their birth families. They told us that **children shouldn't go back to their families if their parents are still unable to look after them properly, if there are too many risks to the child's safety, or if their parents simply do not want them or do not love them.**

If you are in care it is for a good reason, and if you go back you could go back on the same track

Some parents simply won't ever be able to cope with their child, or have an illness that means they will probably never be able to look after the child again. As one child put it to us, a child cannot go back to their parents 'if mum and dad can't cope with the kid'. **Some parents may need help to cope with children, but won't admit any faults or won't cooperate with any help or support.** That might mean that their children cannot return to them. Social workers cannot just accept a parent thinking they always know best for their child. As one young person put it, "That's my child – I know better" – that's taking respect too far.' We were told that in some cultures, parents are seen as always knowing best for their children, but that cannot be accepted in this country.

The children in one group thought that if parents had been unable to look after you once, they were likely to become unable to look after you again if you went back home. They told us that **social services are a constant service and always there, but their own parents 'can drop you when they want'.**

We heard that **the child’s views and their feelings are both important in any decision about whether they should go home**. Some children and young people don’t want to go back to their parents and feel more comfortable with other people. The longer you are in care, the more difficult it is for you to go home: ‘The damage is already done if you have been in care long.’ We were told that **some children are simply better off staying in care**. One group said that **no child should return home if they don’t actually feel safe there**. Another group told us that children’s relationships with their parents can sometimes be better while the child is in care than when they are actually living with them, which is better for both the parent and the child. For some children, though, relationships with their parents can fall away or get worse while they are living in care. It all depends. **There is no general rule about whether it is right to reunite children in care with their parents**. One young person spoke for many when they said, ‘Some kids want to go, and it’s heartbreaking to see others being sent.’

We were told that **some children have special needs that their parents, even though they try, are not able to meet**. If a child has a disability, we were told that it ‘might be safer and improve a kid’s disability and care if in care’.

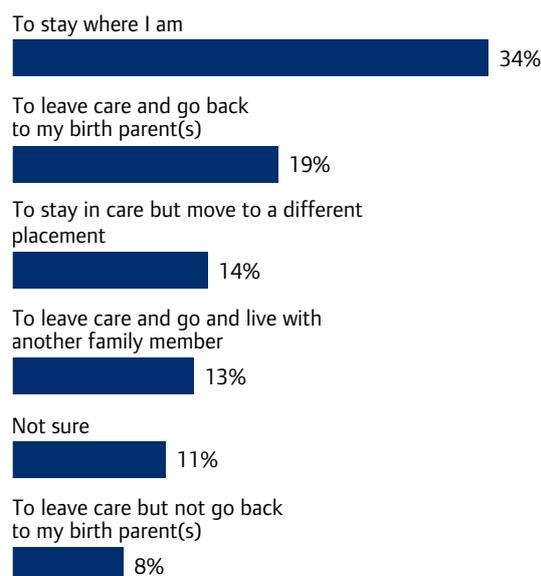
Children also told us that it is important that the problems within a family that had led to a child coming into care in the first place have really been sorted out before that child can move back home. **If the family hasn’t changed, the child shouldn’t go back**. This included whether any health problems of their parents have improved enough for them to be able to cope with the child again. Some groups told us that it would be important to check whether their parents had definitely stopped taking drugs. They also told us that a child shouldn’t go back if there are still risks of violence or their parents still have a drink problem.

One group told us that the behaviour of some children meant that it would not be safe for them to go home. As one young person put it, ‘If you put your parents in danger, then you should be in care – if it’s just little tantrums then it’s not bad.’

In one group we were told that some children in care are not able to go back to their parents because they have escaped from a ‘war country’ and cannot go back there.

Our next question was therefore simply to ask children what they thought would be the best thing for them now. We gave six different choices, and Figure 5 sets out the percentages of the children at our voting sessions who opted for each one.

Figure 5: What would be the best thing for you right now?



Based on answers from 114 children and young people (one answer per person).

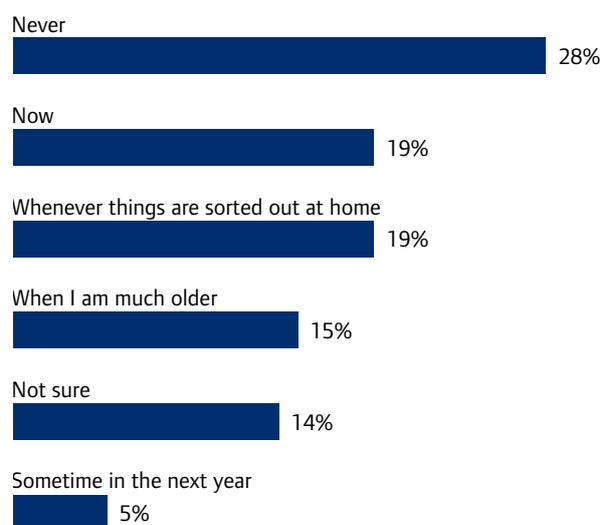
Some kids want to go, and it's heartbreaking to see others being sent

Just over a third of the children (34%) thought the best thing for them was to stay in care, and in the placement they were in. Another 14% thought they should stay in care, but move to a different placement. Therefore almost half (48%) thought they should definitely stay in care. This matches up with the percentage of children (47%) who had already told us they thought they needed to be in care.

Just under one in five children (19%) thought they should now leave care and go back to live with their birth parents. This is a key figure for the Edge of Care project to consider. **Altogether, 40% of the children in care who answered our question thought they should now leave care, but fewer than half of these thought they should go back to their birth parents.** The others thought they should leave care but live with a different member of their family (13% of all those who answered this question), or leave care but not live with their birth parents or a family member (perhaps living independently on their own). It is also important that **the great majority of the children had a definite idea of what would be the best thing for them now; almost nine out of 10 had a clear view on this,** according to their answers to us.

Because the Edge of Care project is particularly looking at whether some children in care could return to live with their birth families, we asked the children at our voting sessions exactly this – when would it be right for them to go back to their own birth families? Figure 6 shows their answers.

Figure 6: When would it be right for you to go back to your birth family?

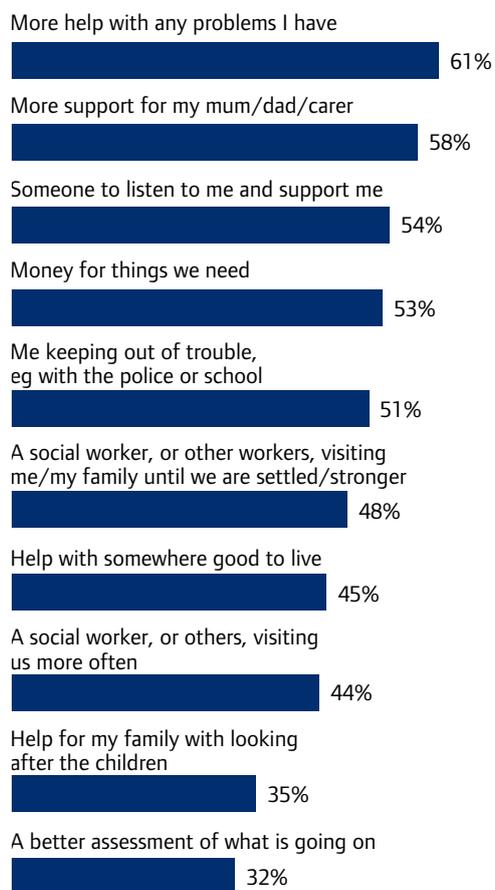


Based on answers from 113 children and young people.

As we already know from answers to an earlier question, just under one in five (19%) thought it would be right for them to go back to their birth family now. Another 5% thought it would be right to go back to their birth family some time in the next year. Another 19% thought they would one day be able to go back to live with their birth family, but only after things had been sorted out at home. Fifteen per cent thought they might be able to return to their birth family when they are much older, and 28% of these children in care thought they should never go back to live with their birth family.

We wanted to know what support and help the children who came to our consultation sessions thought they would need if they were in fact to be placed back with their birth families now. We gave them a list of suggestions, and they were able to choose more than one answer. Their answers are set out in Figure 7.

Figure 7: If you did go back to your birth family now, what support would you or your family need?



Based on answers from 108 children and young people.

There were five different things that at least half the children in our voting sessions thought they would need if they were to go back to live with their birth parents now. **The children thought that if they went home now, what they would most need would be extra help with their own problems, and someone to listen to them and give them personal support. They thought their parents or carers would also need outside support, as well as help to have enough money for the things the family needed. The children also put high on the list that they would also need to keep themselves out of trouble, for example with the police or at school.**

What is clear is that most of the children thought that if they were to go back to live with their birth families, extra support and help would be needed to make this work. They couldn't just go back home without extra help and support.

Do it step by step...
 Do it slowly...
 Make sure the parents really want them

Our discussion groups gave us their ideas on how children's services should go about reuniting children with their families when this was safe and the right thing for the children concerned. One group suggested having regular respite care for the child once they had returned home. Another stressed that both parents and children need reassurance, and that **going back home should not be sudden but gradual, done cautiously and with support to**

children in getting to know their parents again. We heard that going back home will always bring back underlying issues for both children and parents, and these need to be thought about and dealt with. Both parents and child 'need to build confidence with them by getting to know them' again.

The bond that the child used to have will never come back

One young person advised, 'Sometimes it's not done properly. It's rushed. Relationship has broken down. They should discuss things and take time to sort it out before sending back to parents.' Being reunited could start with supervised contact once or twice a week, then go on to contact time alone, before deciding whether it is right to reunite the family. It might be helpful for the parents and children to do some activities together first, perhaps with other parents and children too. Trying some overnight stays together before a decision is made would be important. In any case, the guideline was **'do it step by step'; 'do it slowly'**. And always **'make sure... the parents really want them'**.

Some other issues were raised by our discussion groups about going back home. We heard that the timing is important. If they are returning home, children should go back before it has become too late for it to work, because as time goes on the emotional attachments between children and parents change and may become weaker. As one child put this, 'The bond that the child used to have will never come back.' Others described how things had changed after they left home, making it difficult to return later on: 'As soon as I left home, I did not exist; my picture was taken off the wall.'

Other points made during our discussions included the difference it makes to returning home if a child is on a full care order; the need to make sure that children understand what is planned and why; the need to avoid children moving into and out of care too much; and the need to accept that as children approach adulthood, they naturally wish to take more control over decisions about whether they will return home on leaving care. Going into care and back home too often is not good. As one child said, 'Going in and out of care doesn't help things, it just messes things up.' One group was concerned that sometimes parents have problems with social care services and may feel that professionals are ganging up on them. That can make a big difference to how easy it is for a child to return home.

We also heard the view that going back home sometimes turns out very differently from what was expected. As one young person put it, 'Talking is one thing, putting into practice is another.' For some families, a child returning from care can make other problems in the family worse, and everyone suffers. One example we were given was: 'With parents with alcohol and drug problems, taking the child [back] does not solve the problem. It actually makes it worse.'

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Children told us that trial visits home and overnight stays can certainly test out whether going home will work – but it is important to stop the return home if the trial visit begins to go badly. One child gave us their experience of how this should have changed the decision for them to go back home: ‘I had to do it a few times and my mum did not want me around. When they moved me back, no one was there until something big happened.’

Many children were very clear that social care services have to do a very good assessment of the parents before giving them a child back again. This was not easy – if the parents knew the social worker was about to visit, they would make sure that everything looked OK. Social workers needed to visit unannounced, by surprise to see how things really were – ‘check-ups so they don’t know they’re coming’.

Some children and young people, in different groups, talked about how **parents might need therapy and support to be able to change and to cope with looking after a child again**. One suggestion was group sessions for parents wanting their children back from care. Some parents might simply need to learn how to look after a child properly – one group suggested that some parents could be taught, as some young people themselves had been, how to care for a ‘fake baby’ first.

Going in and out of care
doesn’t help things, it just
messes things up

A very strong view from many of the children and young people in our groups was that **help and support needs to carry on for both children and parents after a child goes home from care.** One child summed this up for us: 'Keep offering the support that a child had while in care – social services shouldn't just cut us off.' Another said that in their experience of going back home, 'It's like a ghost really – once they are gone they are gone.' They should not be 'cutting the ties off straight away'.

Children going home should not have their hobby and interest activities cut off by the move, and the money they had to support their schooling, for clothing and for activities, should not just be cut off when they go home, or that could cause going back home to break down again. One young person explained this and proposed a solution: 'When young people are in care they receive a lot of stuff that their parents can't give them so a lot of arguments are caused. The council should give parents something to keep the young person on track.'

Keep offering the support that the child had while in care – social services shouldn't just cut us off

In one group we were told that in some cultures, when parents speak, the child must not speak, and the child will not feel comfortable talking about things in front of their parents. These cultural issues need to be known about and taken into account in how social workers discuss a return home and how they make checks and support parents and children afterwards.

We wanted to know **what children thought should be done to check that all is well after children have gone home to live with their birth families again.** We asked our discussion groups to give their views on this. Proposals from these discussions included social workers making **random spot-check visits to the home to check what it is normally like there, and that the parents really can look after their children properly. Social workers should talk to the child alone, and somewhere the child feels safe,** away from their parents or other family members, so they feel they can tell the social worker how things really are.

Checks should be made on **practical things like whether there is food in the fridge** for the children. However, the children in one group were worried that social workers might make parents feel bad about themselves if they never tell the parents when they are going to visit and just turn up, and then always talk to the child rather than to the parent.

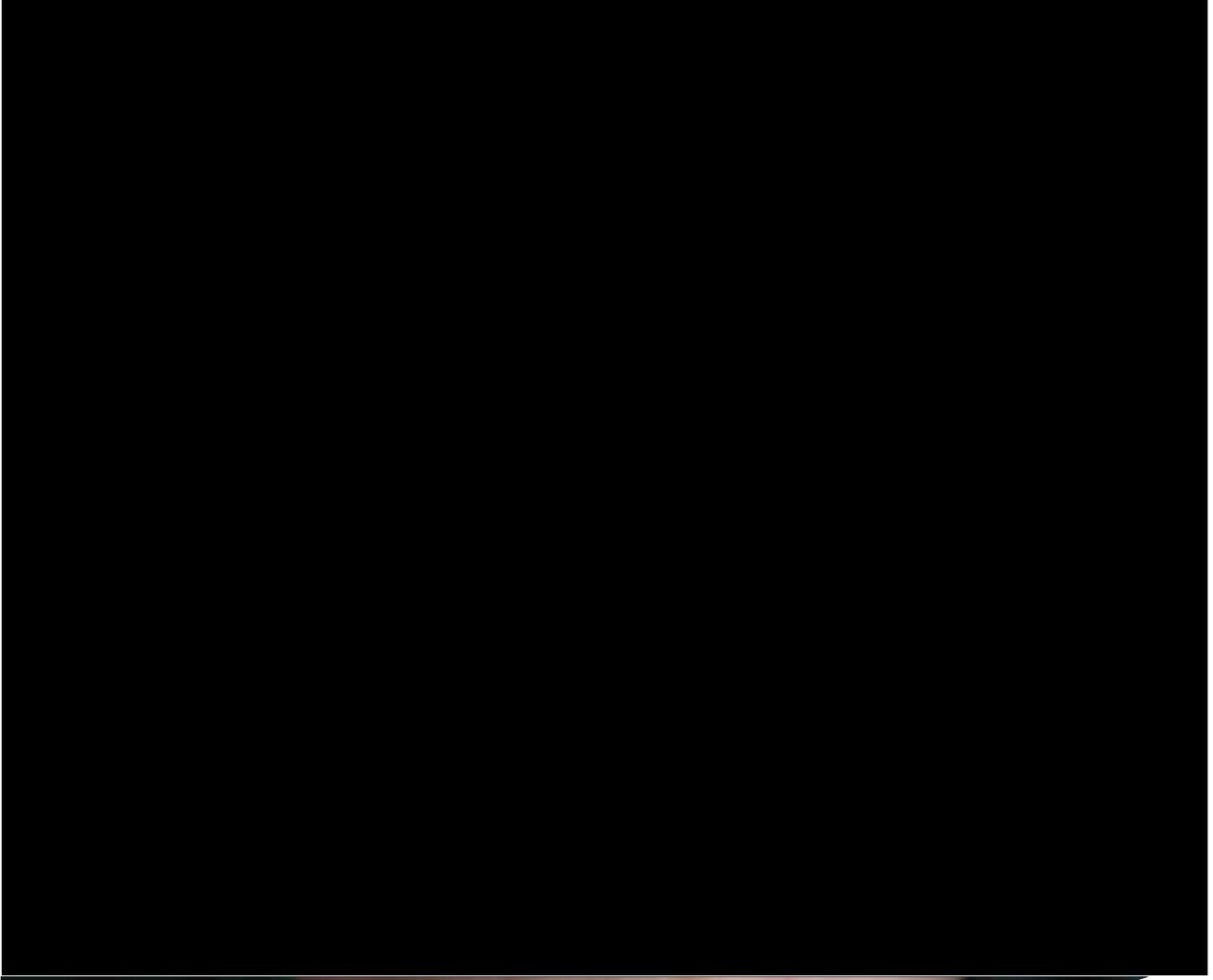
Other suggestions from our groups on how to make sure that children stay safe after going home from care included an advice service for parents whose children have been returned; checking directly with the child every one or two weeks that all is OK for them; checking with the child's school that all is well; checking with any professional person who is working with the child; seeing if any financial help is needed to make things work out; using mobile phones and texting to check with children that all is well; talking separately with the children and the adults in the family; checking how things are in the house early in the morning and at the children's bedtime; and giving written congratulations or certificates to children and parents who are doing well together.

Some thought it was important that children had somewhere they could go to discuss problems at home if they felt they needed to: **'a place for kids to go to see someone when they need to. Not just wait for someone to come and see them'**. Social care services could also run advice groups for children and young people who have been returned home.

We were given some very different views on **using electronic equipment to check on whether children were safe**. Some children in our groups suggested that if social workers were really worried about a child they had sent home, they might help to keep that child safe by using cameras and microphones, as long as these were only used in acceptable places. They might pick up problems and stop people harming the child. However, others said that doing this would be 'weird', that 'your privacy would be completely ruined', and that people who did this 'could get shut down for peeping'.

We compared what the children said might have kept them out of care with what they said would be needed if they went back home out of care now. The three biggest differences were that they thought **having someone to listen to them and support them would be more important if they went home from care, while help for their parents in looking after children, and the children themselves keeping out of trouble, were more important in keeping children out of care in the first place than in helping them go back home out of care.**

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Last messages

We asked each of our discussion groups if there were any other messages they wanted us to give to the government in this report. Here are the messages they wanted us to give.

- Social care services should communicate better with children and families – for example, not moving a child to a new placement just after telling them they will be staying in their placement.
- Parents with mental health problems are less likely to get their children back.
- There's more attention paid to you while you're in care than after you have been sent back home.
- 'Give parents more support before taking kids off them.'
- If family problems really have improved, you can give them a second chance.
- When siblings are separated and the younger ones are adopted, all the contact between the siblings is stopped. Something should be in place so siblings could still have contact.
- Being settled in a placement and then being moved is not a good thing.
- 'Don't take them in care too quickly.'
- Children should not go home until things have cleared up there.
- 'When I moved into care I got told what to do and given more discipline, whereas I'd never had that before. So it was a good thing.'

The last word in this report goes to the young person who described their experience to us in these words.

'There is always a certain problem that would make children go into care. I was taken into care because I was looking after my younger siblings. My mum asked social services for support and they took her children away'

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