

Parents on council care

A report on parents' views by the Children's Rights Director for England

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About the Children's Rights Director



Roger Morgan, Children's Rights Director for England

The law sets out my duties as Children's Rights Director for England. As well as asking children and young people for their views and publishing what they tell us, one of my jobs, with my team, is to ask parents for their views about how their children are being looked after by local councils' social care services.

We also give advice to Her Majesty's Chief Inspector at Ofsted, and to the Government, on children's rights and welfare. We have a duty to identify and raise issues we think are important about the rights and welfare of children living away from home or getting children's social care support. We do this both for individual children and for whole groups of children.

Much has been written about what professionals and politicians think about children being looked after away from their parents, and I have written many reports about the views of children on living away from home, or being helped by children's social care services. This report is different; it is to give parents' viewpoints on having the local council look after their children.

Like all my reports, this report is being published for everyone to read. You can find copies of all my reports on our website: www.rights4me.org. My reports are about children being looked after away from home in England (in children's homes, boarding schools, residential special schools, residential further education colleges, foster care, adoption placements, or residential family centres), about getting help from children's social care services, and about leaving care.

This report gives parents' views and concerns about how councils look after their children, about how it feels to have a child in care, and about the support parents do or do not get from social care services for themselves. The report sets out what parents told us. We have not changed, added to, or rejected their own accounts of being the parents of children in care. I hope that this report will be useful to all professionals in understanding the point of view of parents whose children are looked after by someone else.

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

Summary

The following key points are from our survey of 184 parents of 190 children in care across 58 councils.

Before care

- Fifty-nine per cent said there had been no support to help stop their children going into care. Parents wanted more support and closer working relationships between councils and themselves, as well as more assessment before care decisions. Sometimes support was not of the sort needed, or came too late when a crisis had arrived.

The child's care

- Seventy-four per cent thought their children were being looked after well or very well, mainly because they had good carers.
- Fifty-seven per cent of parents thought their child's placement was the right one, 25% that the child was in the wrong placement. What made a placement right or wrong was mostly whether it met the child's needs.
- Forty-two per cent of parents thought the placement met their child's needs for help with any personal problems.
- Forty-five per cent thought the council usually or always made the right decisions for their child, 38% that it never or hardly ever made the right decisions. The main reasons given for wrong decisions were not working with parents and not meeting the child's needs.

Having a say

- Forty-four per cent of parents said they had no say in decisions about their child, and 69% wanted more say, particularly in decisions about education, placement and family contact. Councils usually asked for parents' views through meetings rather than in other ways.
- Sixty-four per cent of parents had seen their child's care plan, fewer (41%) had a say in it, and fewer again (36%) fully agreed with it. Thirty-seven per cent fully disagreed with their child's care plan.

- Eighty-six per cent of parents had attended a review meeting, but 17% said they could not put their views forward at the meeting.
- Twenty-four per cent of parents did not know whether or not the council planned for their child to return to their care in the future.

Keeping in touch

- Sixty-one per cent said they spoke with their child at least once a week. Eight per cent had no contact at all.
- Thirty-seven per cent said the council usually or always kept them up to date with news about their child; 35% that it never or hardly ever did. Sixty-five per cent wanted more news about their child. Parents most wanted to know about health and school issues.
- Twenty-one per cent spoke to their child's social worker quite often or very often, 18% never spoke to the social worker, and 57% wanted to speak to the social worker more often.
- Forty-nine per cent knew how to make a complaint to the council about their child's care. Twenty-five per cent did not know who they would go to if they were concerned about their child's care; 39% said they would go to a solicitor.

Support for parents

- Seventy-six per cent said they were getting no support, or not enough, for themselves as parents now their child was in care. Twenty-four per cent said they were getting the right amount of support. Parents wanted more personal support and support in keeping in contact with their child and eventually having their child return home.

How it feels to have a child in care

- Fifty-five per cent of parents said there is nothing good about having a child in care. The most common things parents told us were good were that their child was well cared for and that it helped them to cope.

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- Many parents were angry and upset about losing care of their child. Parents told us that the worst things about having a child in care were missing the child, missing daily activities and feeling a failure as a parent.

About this report

We asked parents whose children were being looked after by the council for their views by sending them a set of question cards to fill in and send back to us. We asked parents what they thought about how the council was looking after their children, about the councils' plans for their children's future, about keeping parents informed, about what it feels like having your child in care, about how much say parents have in what happens, and about how much help councils give parents both before and after their child goes into care. In most of our questions we asked parents to write their views in their own words, rather than giving them any suggestions of our own.

Social care authorities in England sent our question cards to parents. Most of the question cards we sent out were not filled in and returned to us. Because of this, we cannot say that the views of the parents who did fill in and return their cards are typical of the views of most parents. They are, however, real views of a large number of real parents on real issues. We had expected to get only a small proportion of our cards filled in and returned, because this was what had happened last time we asked for parents' views, when we wrote a report about children being fostered. This time, parents had different feelings about being asked for their views about their children's care. One wrote to us that they had been upset by our 'ridiculous survey', while another wrote, 'I'm hoping that by sharing my experiences with you that things will be looked at not just for me but for other parents.'

We had replies from **184 parents, giving us their views about the care of 190 children**. Where a parent had more than one child in care, we asked them to tell us about the child who had gone into council care first, but we offered additional question cards if the parent particularly wanted to write about the care of another of their children as well. We heard from parents whose children were **being looked after by 58 social care authorities** across England. Sixty-two per cent of their children were boys, 38% were girls. Their children were aged from birth up to 19; the median age (the middle age of all the children) was 12.

Sixty per cent of the children were in care on a court order. Just over half (52%) of the children were living with foster carers. Sixteen per cent were still living with their parents most of the time: many of these were children with disabilities that the council looked after regularly for a few days to give their parents a break. One in 10 children were living in children's homes. Six per cent had been placed with a relative by the council.

This report gives only the parents' views, without our views being added. We have not left out any views the Government, Ofsted or the Children's Rights Director might disagree with. We have not just picked out those views that we happen to agree with, either. We have not left out any views that the children might disagree with. This report is a bit like a research report. We asked parents a set of questions and we have reported the answers they gave us.

Where parents gave us similar answers but used slightly different words we have counted them as the same answer. We have included quotations from parents, in their own words, where we think these sum up what others said or where we think they are important examples of parents' views. We have, however, changed the names of children or places that some parents gave.

We are sending this report to ministers and other key people in Parliament, and to government officials. We are giving the report to people in Ofsted, and sending it to each of the UK Children's Commissioners, and to all children's social care authorities in England.

I am grateful to all the council staff who helped us by sending our question cards to parents, and to all the parents who have taken a great deal of time and trouble to write and send us their views on issues that are painful for so many of them.

Keeping children out of care

We asked parents to tell us how social care services had tried to keep their children from having to go into care in the first place. We heard from 157 parents on this. **Over half (59%) said there had been no support to help stop their children needing to go into care.** Ten or more parents told us they had been given support in the following areas:

- a referral for specialist help (16 parents)
- a lot of help (without further details) (13 parents)
- respite care (13 parents)
- home help (10 parents).

We then asked parents what extra help and support they thought should have been given before their children were taken into care. **A third (33%) said that the council should simply have given them support when they asked for it.** Only one in seven (14%) told us that there was no other support they had needed at that time. Four parents told us they thought social services had done everything they could. Ten or more parents told us that they should have been given more support in the following areas:

- more assessment before the decision was made (21 parents)
- social care working closely with the parents (19 parents)
- help in caring for their child (15 parents)
- more advice (12 parents).

As home help and respite care were on the list of the help some parents did get, it is important to note that nine parents told us they had needed home help but didn't get it and five parents said they had needed respite care that they weren't given.

There were some common themes in the things parents told us about the support provided to keep their children at home and out of care. One was that **some parents got a lot of help, but of the wrong sort**: 'a lot, but not in the ways I needed them to. They put a lot of unnecessary stress and pressure on me'; 'I asked them to help me with Kevin, but they went the wrong way'; 'none, apart from putting me on a basic cooking course that I didn't need and an offer of someone to clean my house once a week, which I also didn't need'. One person told us they thought the council had misled them in the way it gave them help with their problems: 'were misled into believing we were being supported to obtain better housing, not that the children were going into care'.

Another theme was that **parents were given help when it was too late to keep the child out of care**: 'I feel let down by social services they only seem to help after a crisis and by then it's too late'; 'from the time problems arose at home support took so long to put in place. Therefore period from initial problems was extremely long'; 'it seemed that the only time help was available was at critical times'.

Some parents told us that they had left it too late before asking the council for help: 'by the time we had contacted social care we had already reached the point where some form of residential provision was necessary'.

Other parents told us that they felt **they had to battle with social care services which had already decided the child should be in care, though their parents believed that with support they could return home**: 'I don't think they gave me a chance to prove myself but am working well with social services'; 'I did everything that was asked of me so my children could come home but still the social worker said no'; 'it was unclear on what basis we could get support. We seemed to be fighting the "system" at every stage'; 'once the danger had been removed... my children should have been returned after 72 hours to me'.

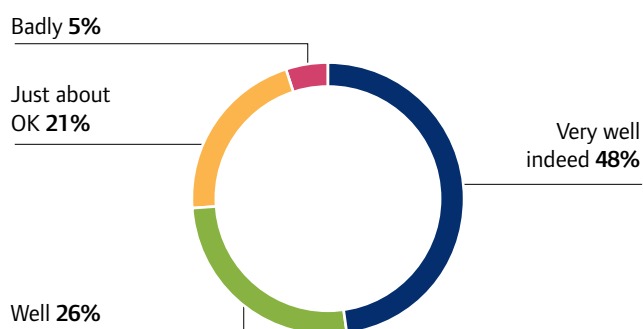
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Parents also wrote to us about receiving excellent support from social care services: ‘they helped place my child with my mother, so that I could be there, most of the time, to care for her’; ‘they put me in touch with services for drink and drug addiction’; ‘I do not think anything else could have been done to prevent my son from going into care’; ‘I feel that I was given a great deal of support by my social worker and everyone involved’.

What parents think of how councils are caring for their children

The chart below shows how parents rated their children’s care by the council. One hundred and fifty-five parents filled in this rating for us.

How well is your child being cared for?



Sometimes, parents told us that **social care services didn’t give them the support they needed to care for the child because of their position in the family**. Grandparents wrote that, ‘as grandparents we did not receive a great deal of support’, and a single parent said he had needed ‘help, emotional support and financial help to a newly appointed single father’. One parent described how they felt that social care services had made assumptions about the situation, which didn’t help them care for the child: ‘local authority were negligent in the fact they did not recognise me as an individual, and only saw me as part of a dysfunctional couple’.

One parent wrote to us about how they thought that social workers concentrated so much on the child that they failed to see how the parents could, with help, take care of their child again. ‘I keep telling my son’s social worker – support the parents and the parents will support the child. But whenever I voice my difficulties, lack of support and lack of adequate respite, it’s like a broken record – “it’s the child’s needs we have to consider”’.

Overall, parents were positive about how the council was caring for their child. **Almost half the parents (48%) said their child was being cared for ‘very well indeed’, and almost three quarters (74%) said their child was being cared for well or very well. Only one in 20 said their child’s care was bad, and no parent ticked the ‘very badly’ rating.**

Here are the things that parents most often told us were best about how their children were being looked after in care.

- Their child received good care from their carer (50 parents).
- Their child had skilled staff and carers (17 parents).
- Their child had good routines (16 parents).
- The placement is right for their child (15 parents).
- They can spend time with their child (13 parents).
- There are opportunities for trips and activities (13 parents).
- Their child is getting a good education (10 parents).

Parents described the best things about their child being in care: ‘now he has only positive influences’; ‘he doesn’t steal’; ‘he gets the support he needs that I’m unable to give him because of the problems he has’; ‘they are in a happy, loving and structured family environment’. For some parents, the best thing was when carers worked well with parents: ‘everything – the foster carer really listens to what we want for the children’; another parent said their child ‘has a carer that hasn’t judged us – and with us being able to work alongside each other, she has very consistent care and has all that she needs’.

A few parents told us about their mixed experiences. Some wrote about their child getting a good placement following a number of bad ones: ‘I feel he is safe and I trust completely the foster carer, unlike some other carers he has been with’; ‘there isn’t a bad thing now they’re finally settled after seven times of being moved’.

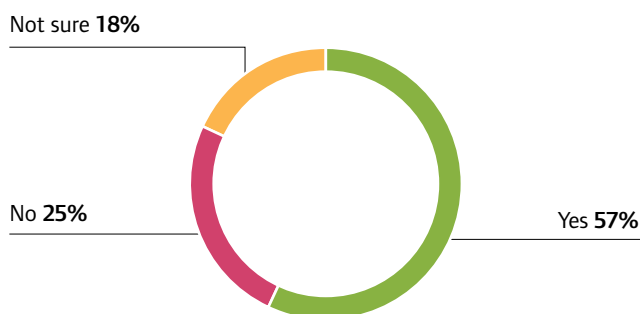
One parent was concerned that social care services did not give a good carer enough support: their child was ‘with someone he and I know and trust and she works very hard to give him a good quality of life and care. Despite the fact that she in turn has received virtually no help and support from social services’.

We asked parents to tell us what they thought were the worst things for their child about being in care. Twelve parents told us their child was not settled in their placement. The other main things parents thought were worst things for their children were that they were not living with their own parents, they had little contact with their parents, and that their parents were not involved in decisions about them. Two parents said their children had been treated unfairly; two said their children had been mistreated while in care. One parent told us they thought it was wrong that carers could give their child more things than they could afford to give as parents.

Here are some comments in parents’ own words about the worst things about care for their child: ‘residential care can never replicate a parent especially when thinking about a child’s long-term future, eg concern that child is smoking, absconding, taking drugs. Residential care is much more “here and now”’; ‘she can see the favouritism shown towards the other [natural] children in the household, and she knows people only allow her to stay there because they are paid to’.

The next chart shows whether parents thought their child was in the right placement for their needs. One hundred and sixty parents answered this question.

Is your child in the right placement for them?



Parents were divided on whether the council had placed their child in the right placement for them, but **well over half (57%) thought their child’s placement was right, while a quarter thought their child was not in the right placement.**

The main thing that made a placement right or wrong for a child was **whether it met their child's needs** properly. Thirty per cent of parents said their child's placement was right because it met their needs, while 10% thought their child's needs were not being properly met where they were placed. **Whether their child had good carers** was important for many parents. Twenty per cent said their child was placed with a good family, while 8% said their child was not happy with their present carers. For many parents, **a placement was the right one if their child was happy and settled** there.

Two parents told us their child's placement was wrong because they were separated from their brothers or sisters; another two told us that their child's placement was wrong because the carers were from a different racial background.

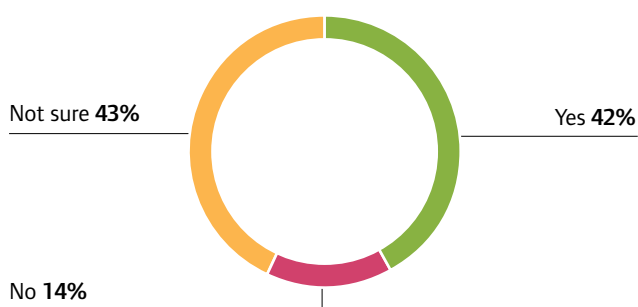
Some parents wrote that they had mixed feelings about whether their child's placement was the right one. One parent wrote 'although he seems to be happy, in unguarded moments he seems sad and withdrawn'. Others had concerns about particular placements: 'he is in a residential placement where he is showing a lot of mental and emotional problems and is having to be restrained a lot'; 'his foster parents are over 60, and I feel are too old to look after him'; 'she has a recognised autistic spectrum but lives in a mainstream children's home... they do not have structured leisure time – which she needs to meet her special needs'.

Some parents told us how pleased they were with their child's placement: 'I have met my daughter's carer and I am very happy that my daughter is very well cared for as part of the family'; 'Dee has been with this family for 8–10 years. She has done so well at school and now she is at college. She is now a very independent person'; 'Stuart seems to be very happy. He was having problems at first but now seems to have settled quite good. He ... has come far and will go far'; 'since he has been in placement his behaviour and well-being have come along so much, I believe it is down to the people looking after him'.

One of the key issues for many parents was that **the placement seemed the right one for the child's needs, but was simply too far away from them as parents**. One parent summed this up: 'the foster carer is a lovely lady and she is doing a great job with him but I am in Bedford and they are in Devon'.

Parents told us that it is important that their child's placement meets their child's needs. We asked parents whether they thought their child was given the help they needed with any personal problems they had. The following chart gives their answers.

Does your child get the help they need with personal problems?



Although **four out of 10 parents said they thought their child did get the help they needed with personal problems**, and only one in seven (14%) said they didn't, **many parents (43%) were not sure about the help their children got for personal problems while living in care**. Parents told us what the main things were that their children needed, but were not getting, while they were being looked after in care. Here are their top answers:

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- to be treated more as an individual (from 26 parents)
- more contact with their family (from 24 parents)
- one to one support from carers (from 13 parents)
- qualified and permanent staff (from 13 parents)
- more parental involvement in decisions (from 11 parents)
- local facilities for children with disabilities (from 10 parents).

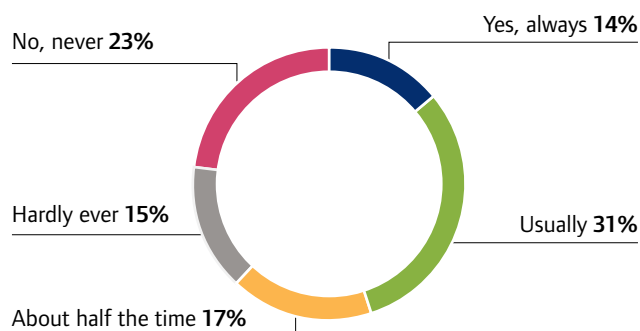
On their question cards, some parents wrote about particular issues they thought were important in helping children. These included helping children to know about their birth family ('help let the kids know it's not just the foster carer and the social worker. Parents care too'), choosing placements where there would not be a clash between children in care and a foster carer's own children ('I think children should be placed with carers who do not have children of their own as my other children always had conflict when there was other children in the family'), and preparing children to leave care ('make sure that they are ready to stand on their own once they reach the age to leave and not just forget them').

One parent wrote that carers should sometimes be stricter with teenagers: 'teenagers such as Tara should not always be able to dictate what they want to do and when'. But another thought that councils should take more notice of children's views: 'they should be listening to what the children want and ask for, not what the council want'. Some wrote about particular extra things they thought their children needed: 'the social worker should visit the children more frequent while in care so they're OK'; 'there needs to be more facilities for children with disabilities'.

Decisions about children

Some parents told us about their concerns that councils, rather than parents, make decisions about their child. We asked parents whether they thought the council was making the right decisions for their child. We had answers from 176 parents.

Does the council make the right decisions for your child?



Overall, parents were not as happy with the decisions councils made for their children as they were with how their children were being looked after. **While nearly half (48%) thought their councils looked after their children very well indeed, only one in seven (14%) thought their council always made the right decisions for their children. Nearly a quarter (23%) thought their council never made the right decisions for their child.**

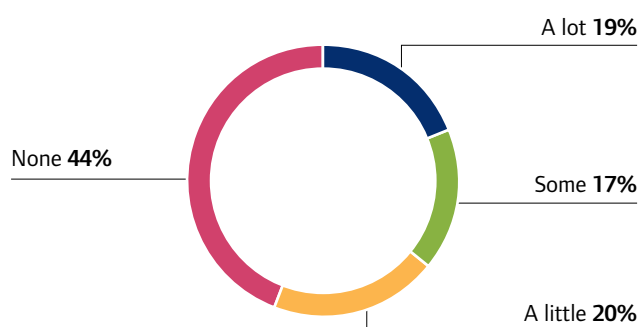
A third (34%) of parents thought their council made wrong decisions for their children because they didn't work with parents when making decisions. **One in five parents (21%) thought councils made decisions which didn't meet the child's needs.** Seventeen per cent said the council had made wrong decisions because they had chosen the wrong placement for the child.

Often, parents thought councils made the wrong decision because things hadn't worked out for the child. Examples of this were: '3 adoptive placements broken down'; 'he has been in 14 placements'; 'on one occasion my son was being bullied'.

Some criticised the way they saw social care services making decisions: 'left to authorities, they chose the cheapest option over the right option every time'; 'good decisions are usually made, but take longer than we would like'. Some gave us examples of good decisions made by councils: 'moved her to a place nearer to her friends – this prevented her running away to them'; 'when problems occurred for us as a family I felt that social services, my social worker and the children with disabilities team worked to find the best possible place for my son'. One simply wrote, 'I am usually fairly satisfied by arrangements made by the council.'

One hundred and eighty-six parents told us how much say they felt they had when the council made decisions about their child. The chart sets out their answers.

How much say do you have when the council makes decisions about your child?



Clearly, **many parents feel they do not have much say in council decisions about their child in care; 44% say they have no say, and only 19% say they have a lot of say. Over two thirds (69%) told us they think they should have more say.** One hundred and nine parents told us the sorts of decisions they thought parents should have more say in. Here are the things parents most often said they wanted more say in:

- their child's education (26% of parents)
- their child's placement (22% of parents)

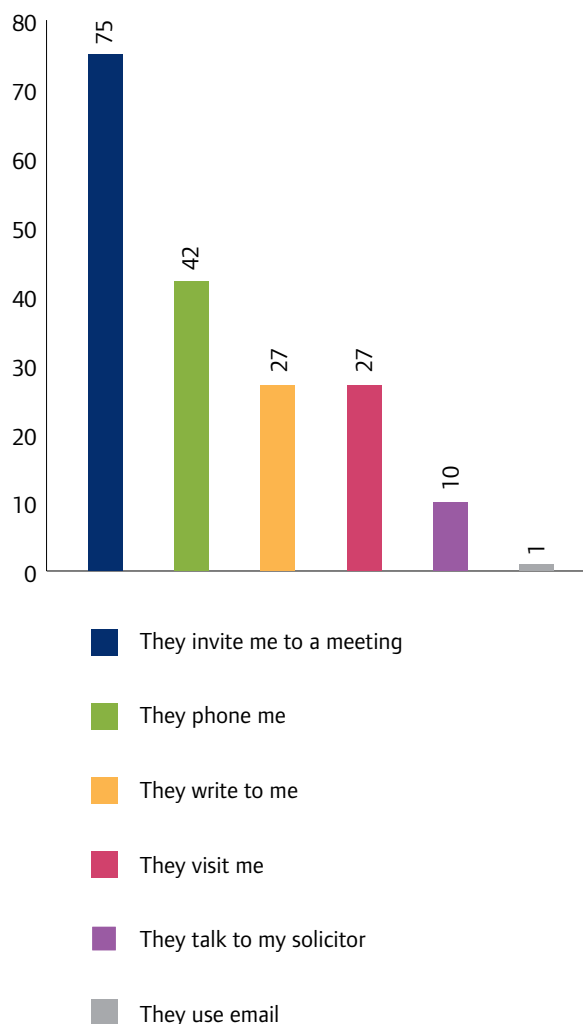
- arrangements for contact between parent and child (21% of parents)
- day to day care of their child (15% of parents)
- future plans for their child (11% of parents)
- health issues (11% of parents).

Almost a quarter (23%) of parents told us they thought they should be involved in every decision about their child. Two parents said they didn't think they should be involved in decisions. Three parents said they didn't think they should be involved in making decisions, but they should always be told what decisions had been made.

Although some parents felt they were well able to get their views across ('I am not slow in coming forward when I have an issue'; 'won't be fobbed off with something we're not happy with'), **some said that councils need to listen and take notice of what parents say, not just ask their views.** One said, 'I tend to cooperate with the local authority but don't feel like they listen to what I have to say.' As another parent put it, they wanted to be asked, 'but listened to'.

We wanted to know how councils found out parents' views when they were making decisions for their children. For this question, we suggested a list of possible answers, and parents could choose more than one. One hundred and eighty-two parents answered the question. Of these, 72 (40%) said the council didn't usually ask them in any way. The chart shows the different ways councils usually asked the other 110 parents for their views. The numbers are percentages of the number of parents who answered the question.

How does the council usually ask what you think when it makes decisions about your child?



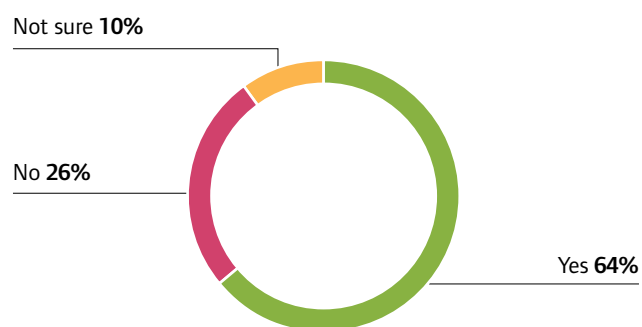
Clearly, **being invited to a meeting is the main way that councils ask parents for their views about decisions**, followed much less often by phoning, writing, or visiting them.

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Care plans

Each child in care should have a care plan about how they are to be looked after now and in the future. The next chart shows how many parents, out of the 180 who answered this question, said they had seen their child's care plan.

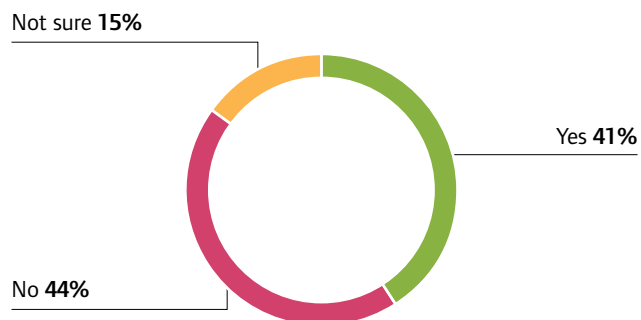
Have you seen your child's care plan?



Nearly two thirds (64%) of the parents had seen their child's care plan, but just over a quarter had not. Four per cent (seven parents) said they did not know what a care plan was: we have included these in the 26% who had not seen their child's care plan.

Here are the answers from 180 parents on whether they had a say in what their child's care plan said.

Did you have a say in your child's care plan?

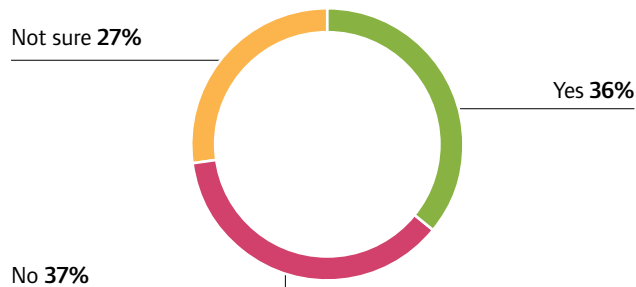


The **parents who had no say in their child's care plan just outnumbered those who told us they did have a say, with four out of 10 (41%) telling us they had a say in the plan.**

Some parents praised and some criticised how their councils made plans for their children: 'they do listen to me – both the social worker and foster carer'; 'once care plan has been written up we then get to discuss what is on it. Not before'. One person summed up how many felt when they wrote: 'they need to share their plans with me because I'm an outsider with my own child'.

The next chart shows the answers from 171 parents on whether they agreed with their child's care plan.

Do you agree with your child's care plan?



Just over a third of parents (36%) agreed with their child's care plan. A similar number of parents (37%) disagreed with it. Over a quarter (27%) were not sure.

Some parents wrote to us with detailed criticisms of how the council had planned for their child. Examples were: 'no long term plans made – results in uncertainty and anxiety for child and parent'; 'although care plan in place – meetings held, a LAC meeting decided that Tom would be best having respite care but when put forward to panel they overruled this decision – therefore why bother having meetings?'.

Review meetings

Review meetings are usually where major decisions are made about plans for a child in care. Out of 184 parents who told us about review meetings, the great majority **(86%) said they had attended a review meeting about their child.** Another one in 10 knew about review meetings, but hadn't been to one. Seven parents (4%) said they hadn't heard about review meetings.

Over three quarters (78%) of parents who had been to a review meeting said they had been able to give their views at the meeting. Some parents had been to a review meeting, but **17% of parents told us they were not able to give their views at the meeting, and another 5% said they had given their views but were not listened to.**

What is planned for the child's future

One hundred and seventy-nine parents told us if the council's plan was for their child to return to live with them in the future. **Sixteen per cent of parents told us that the plan was for their child to return to their care one day; almost half (47%) said that the plan was not for their child to return to them. Almost a quarter (24%) did not know whether the council planned for their child to return.** Thirteen per cent already had their children living at home with them; for example, because their child was getting regular respite care but living at home the rest of the time.

Seventy-seven parents made further comments about the council's plan for their child. Fifteen of these (19%) said they simply wanted their child to come home, and 12 (16%) said the plan was currently being discussed or changed. As we have already seen, some did not know about the plan for their child. Other comments included concerns that plans kept changing, or that plans weren't detailed enough, or, in some cases, that plans weren't changed when the situation changed.

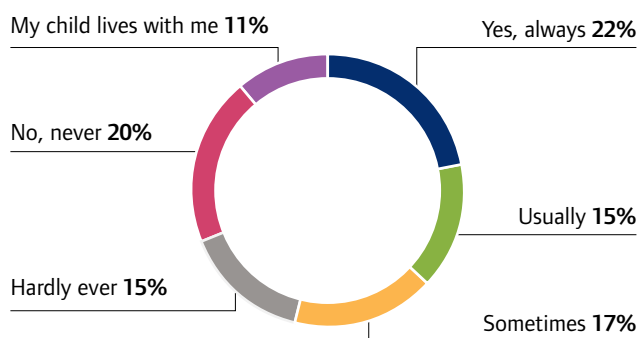
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Keeping in touch with a child in care

We heard from 183 parents about how often they spoke to their child in care. **Sixty-one per cent of parents spoke to their child in care at least once every week, and over a third (38%) spoke to their child every day or most days.** Some parents had much less contact – 15 parents (8%) told us they had no contact at all with their child any more, and 12 (7%) said they were ‘hardly ever’ in touch with their child.

One hundred and eighty-three parents told us how well their council kept them up to date with news about how their child was doing. Their answers are shown in the next chart.

Does the council keep you up to date with news about how your child is doing?



There was a wide range of answers to this question. **Just over a third (37%) of parents said their council usually or always keeps them up to date with news about their child, and just over a third (35%) said it hardly ever or never does.** For just over one in 10 (11%) of the other parents, their child was living at home with them anyway, so the council didn't need to keep them up to date.

Two thirds (65%) of the 181 parents who answered the question told us they thought the council should tell them more about how their child was doing. Seventeen per cent said that their council didn't need to tell them more than it was already telling them. A quarter of parents said they simply wanted to be given news about how their child was doing generally. Here are the four things parents most wanted to know more about their child in care.

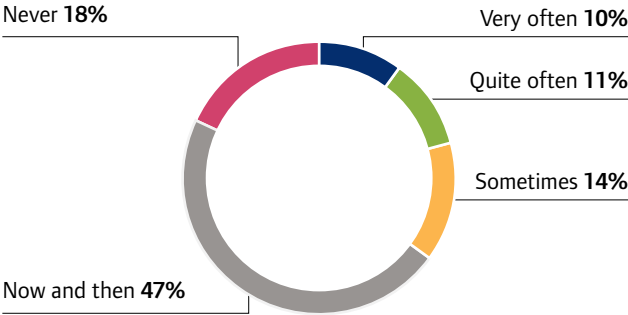
- their child's health (33% of parents)
- how their child is doing at school (26% of parents)
- how their child is getting on in their placement (17% of parents)
- their child's behaviour (11% of parents).

Eight parents told us they wanted to be told if their child had any concerns about their care, and six said the council needed to keep them informed better about meetings they needed to go to about their child. One parent said they wanted the council to send them up to date photographs of their child. Some wanted to know everything in great detail: 'every last detail from waking up to going to bed'. Others wanted to know about major events or issues; 'any illnesses, any hospital appointments, any bullying and problems'; 'school reports and progress, if the child runs away'. As one put it, 'on the whole they are still our children and even if in care most parents do care'.

Keeping in touch with social workers

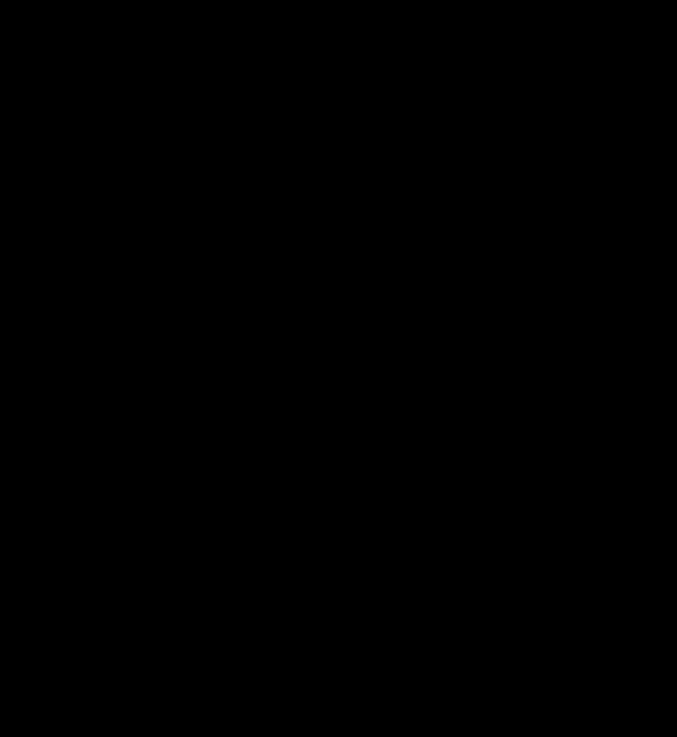
The chart below shows how often parents spoke with their child's social worker. Answers to this question came from 183 parents.

How often do you speak with a social worker about your child?



Most parents spoke with their child's social worker occasionally; 61% spoke to them 'sometimes' or 'now and then'. One in five (21%) spoke to their child's social worker quite often or very often, and 18% never spoke to their child's social worker. **Over half of all parents (57%) told us they wanted to speak with their child's social worker more often.**

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Complaints and concerns

We asked parents if they knew how to make a complaint about how the council was looking after their child, if they ever needed to. Out of the 182 parents who answered this question, **just under half (49%) said they knew how to make a complaint about their child's care. Over a third (36%) said they didn't know.** The rest said they weren't sure about it: 'don't know, would have to find out'.

When we asked parents who they would go to if they thought their child was not being looked after properly, 157 parents sent us answers. We did not suggest any answers to them. **A quarter (25%) of parents said they didn't know who they would go to if their child was not being looked after properly. Well over a third (39%) said they would go to their solicitor.** Here are the main people parents told us they would go to:

- solicitor (39% of parents)
- social services department (16% of parents)
- social worker (13% of parents)
- Member of Parliament (7% of parents).

Other people parents said they would go to included the police, the ombudsman, and an advocate. Four parents (3%) said they would contact Ofsted.

Although many parents would go to a solicitor, **some were afraid that raising concerns like this could make matters worse for themselves or their child:** 'I did consult a solicitor two years ago but was put off by the idea of having to involve courts as it wouldn't help my children'; 'I think I have been treated so badly I think it would get worse'; '... my solicitor. But fear of rocking the boat and social services being worse towards our situation scares me'. Some others thought that if they made a complaint or raised a concern they would not be believed: 'I've tried everyone, but they take no notice'; 'I don't know, but even if you did you would not be believed'.

Support for parents

We heard from 178 parents about whether they thought the council was giving them enough support for themselves as parents. **Three quarters (76%) of these parents said their council gave them no support or not enough support.** Fifty-seven per cent said they had no support at all. For many, one parent summed up how they felt: 'support is aimed at the child. There is little or no help for parents'. **A quarter (24%) said they had just the right amount of support.** The two top kinds of support parents told us they were getting from their councils were general support for themselves as parents, and **help with travel and travel costs** to make it possible to visit their child in care.

When we asked what extra support parents needed, the top request, from a quarter of all parents, was simply for the council to give them general support for themselves as parents. Here are the four areas in which parents most often wanted support:

- help working towards their child being returned to them (23% of parents)
- help in having regular contact with their child (20% of parents)
- financial help (14% of parents)
- help for parents, as well as children, after a family breakdown (11% of parents).

Those who wanted financial help wanted it for their children as much as for themselves: 'money towards day trips out with my son and help towards my son having a holiday with us'. One parent wrote about how they still needed help for themselves after their family broke down, even though their child was in good care: 'more understanding that even though we know this is best for Tim, that we are all traumatised over this'. Some other parents wanted planning for their child's future to start earlier, counselling for themselves, respite care, or domestic help. One parent told us they had wanted help before their child was born. Another said they simply wanted 'advice on how to cope'. A few parents didn't want social care help for themselves: 'I don't need help. I sorted myself out.'

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What it is like having your child in care

On the question cards, and without suggesting anything ourselves, we invited parents to tell us what were the best and worst things about having your child in care. **Over half of the 148 answers (55%) said there was nothing best about it at all.** One parent wrote 'there is nothing "best" about having a child in care. It is one of the most painful situations a parent can ever face'; another wrote: 'how can there be a good thing about losing your child?'.

Here are the most usual answers out of the 109 best things about having your child in care that parents sent in:

- their child is well cared for (19% of the answers)
- it is easier for the parent to cope (19% of answers)
- their child has a normal family life (8% of answers).

Other best things sent in by other parents were that they could give more attention to other children in the family, that their child's behaviour had improved once they went into care, and that their child was happy.

Summing up the views of those who said that the best thing was knowing their child was well cared for was the parent who wrote: 'for me, nothing, but for Jesse... he's happy'. Many wrote to us about how they were able to cope better themselves, and with their other children, once their child had gone into care. Examples were: 'I don't get the abuse my son gives to others and my daughter is safe'; 'I feel safe in my home'; 'the responsibility was taken from me so I could hold down my job and keep a house going and look after my other child properly'; 'it gives myself time to sort out my own problems and turn my life around'; 'going to bed instead of wondering what's happening at 3am to a 13-year-old girl'.

Altogether, parents sent in 158 worst things about having your child in care. Here are the most frequent ones:

- your child not being at home (28% of answers)
- missing your child (22% of answers)
- missing out on your child growing up (18% of answers)
- feeling that you are a failure as a parent (14% of answers)

- not being able to make decisions about how your child is brought up (9% of answers)
- not having enough contact with your child (9% of answers)
- your child's needs not being met in care (7% of answers).

Many parents wrote of their **anger and other emotions at having their child in care**. The parents' own words speak for themselves: 'you destroyed my life for a long time'; 'a living nightmare, hell on earth'; 'I've never felt so depressed'; 'having to say goodbye at the end of contact'; 'my life feels empty without him and incomplete'; 'losing the love between parent and child'; 'that he thinks the foster family are his parents'; 'you don't have children to put them in care'; 'I have been made out to be a heartless, unfeeling monster and have felt stripped of my honour, dignity, self-respect and identity'; 'I feel like my heart has been cut out because I am unable to protect them from the inadequate care they receive from the council'.

Others wrote of how **it made them feel a failure**: 'embarrassed – feel I've failed'; 'guilt about not being able to cope'; 'attending review meetings and feeling a totally rubbish parent'; 'knowing that I could not achieve at home what he receives in care'; 'people calling me an unfit mother'; 'I feel shame that I let the child down'.

One parent wrote about how their feelings of failure and guilt had changed over time: 'I felt so guilty at first that I was abandoning her, but now I can honestly say I don't feel anything negative as it's all changed for the better.'

Some parents wrote to us about how **the social care system seemed to them to work against parents**: 'you feel you are on a never ending battle. No one listens. No one understands'; 'the council should offer more support to parents instead of becoming judge, jury and executioner'; 'the stigma. Everyone – including social services at first – presuming you're a bad parent'. Some others wrote that they felt it worked against their children too: 'she's rebelling like all children in the system do! She did have hope now the longer she's in care she's got no chance'; 'he came out of care considerably worse than when he went in'. One parent wrote that in care there was a 'lack of cuddles for our daughter as staff have a no cuddles policy'.

Individual messages from parents

As well as answering our questions, we gave parents the opportunity to write any messages of their own that they wanted to put forward for this report. Here is a selection of their messages, which we have chosen as representing both the positive and negative messages sent in.

'I never, ever expected that one of my children would be in care. Please remember that for many of us it is an incredibly painful separation. At review meetings please respect our families. Please don't make hasty judgements before you have to know us.'

'I think social services should consider very carefully when it comes to parents where one is known to them, the other is not. Social services abuse their powers and label people.'

'If social services could help before a crisis they would be a better service. Parents sometimes need help and support before a family breakdown.'

'If you're honest, and work with social workers they will give you a chance and work with you too. They're not all bad. They do what's best for the child.'

'It affects the health and well-being of the parents' lives and the extended family detrimentally.'

'It is a failing to allow social workers to move on as frequently as they do.'

'People who are case holders should not be student social workers... people who are older and more experienced could be a better choice.'

'It's a voluntary placement, but I don't have any choice really.'

'On the whole, mine has been a positive experience, although it would be good if departments worked together more rather than against each other, eg education, social services, health.'

'Remember that not all parents who struggle are bad parents.'

'Respite care when it works is brilliant but can be difficult to access at the beginning.'

'Shortage of social workers is an ongoing problem.'

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‘Sometimes parents feel bullied into allowing children to go into care. They do not understand their rights and should be advised by council workers to seek legal advice as soon as possible, preferably before the child/children are taken into care.’

‘We are very grateful for the help we receive. Thank you very much.’

‘We have feelings too. Don’t put us down and make us feel worthless, especially when some of us have done nothing wrong.’

‘It can work if the child is happy.’

Last words

The last words in this report go to parents who told us of many of the daily things about being a parent that they missed by having a child in care.

‘I hate the fact that someone else looks after my children when they are ill. Or when they wake up in the night it’s not me that goes to them.’

‘I don’t know how she is or anything about her what she is like now. I worry a lot and hope she is OK.’

‘I have missed out on birthdays and Christmas.’

‘I miss the school runs, helping with homework, going to parks, swimming.’

‘...sounds strange I know but I love to wash my daughter’s clothes when she comes home so that she smells like my daughter.’

A summary of parents’ wishes

From what parents told us, here are 10 main wishes from parents with children in care:

- help to keep their child from needing to go into care
- that the child should be in a placement that meets his or her needs
- to have a say in the child’s care plan
- to have a say in the child’s placement, education and family contact
- help to put their views as parents in reviews, if they find this difficult
- to know whether the council plans eventually that the child should return home
- to have regular news about their child, especially about their health and how they are doing at school
- to have regular contact with the child’s social worker
- to know how to complain to the council about the child’s care
- to have good support to have the child back home, if that is the plan.

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