

# Children's experience of private fostering

A report 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. One of my main duties is to ask children and young people for their views about how children are looked after in England. This includes children living away from home and children getting any sort of help from council social care services.

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

In 2005, we wrote a report about the views of children who were living with private foster parents.<sup>1</sup> This was to tell the Government what some privately fostered children thought of the new rules and regulations about private fostering the Government was proposing at that time.<sup>2</sup> The Government took notice of what the children said in that report and changed some of the rules in line with the children's advice (for example, to make sure that social workers always see privately fostered children on their own when they visit to make sure they are OK).

This new report is to check with some privately fostered children on how those rules are working out for them. The Government will eventually have to decide whether the rules should stay as they are or whether they need changing again. This report is to feed children's views in to that decision.

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](http://www.rights4me.org)



<sup>1</sup> *Private fostering: some views from privately fostered children on the Government's proposals about private fostering*, Children's Rights Director, published by the Commission for Social Care Inspection, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Private fostering is where a child aged under 16 (or 18 if they have a disability) lives for more than 27 days in a row with a family who are not their parents or close relatives, and this is not arranged by a local council.



# Summary

## **The following key points came from our survey and discussion groups:**

- These are the views of some privately fostered children who councils know about and visit. Children who councils do not know about may have different views and experiences.
- Out of these particular children, 32 of the 34 children who sent their views in through our survey said their private fostering placements were right for them.
- The most usual people to arrange private fostering placements were the child's parents.
- But some children told us their private fostering was arranged by their local social care services – this needs looking into, because councils cannot arrange private fostering.
- Over three quarters of the children had a say in the choice of their private foster parents, and most had a say in everyday decisions in their foster families.
- Just over three quarters of the children knew their private foster carers before they moved in with them – one in five didn't know them before they went to live with them.
- Children need to be able to have another placement if they need to move away from their private foster carers.
- Children would like to have a trial stay with possible private foster carers before the decision is made to move in.
- Over three quarters of the children had been given enough information about their private foster carers before moving in.
- There needs to be more information telling parents and carers that they must tell social care services about children being fostered privately.
- A fifth of the children said they were being visited less often by their social workers than the law says.
- Children who were privately fostered more than two years ago were less likely than those fostered in the last two years to have had a say in choosing their carers, less likely to have known their private foster carers before moving in with them, and were less likely to be visited often by a social worker.
- Social workers usually see children in the private foster carers' home, and how often social workers speak to the child in private varies from every visit to not at all.
- Most children can talk with their social worker in private during check-up visits, but whether this happens at every visit, as the law says it must, still varies.
- Children want their social workers to keep checking that they are all right, by regularly phoning them, speaking directly to them, checking with their schools and paying some 'surprise visits' to their foster homes.
- Privately fostered children want more funding and support for private fostering, and help, if needed, with school issues.

## The children who gave their views

This report gives only the children's 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 put quotations from children, in their own words, where we think these sum up what others said or where we think they are important examples of the children's views. The quotes are exactly as the children wrote them; we have not changed any spelling or punctuation

For this report, we heard the views of 59 privately fostered children. Thirty-four of these sent in their views through a survey, and we met another 25 in person in one of four discussion groups in different places round the country.

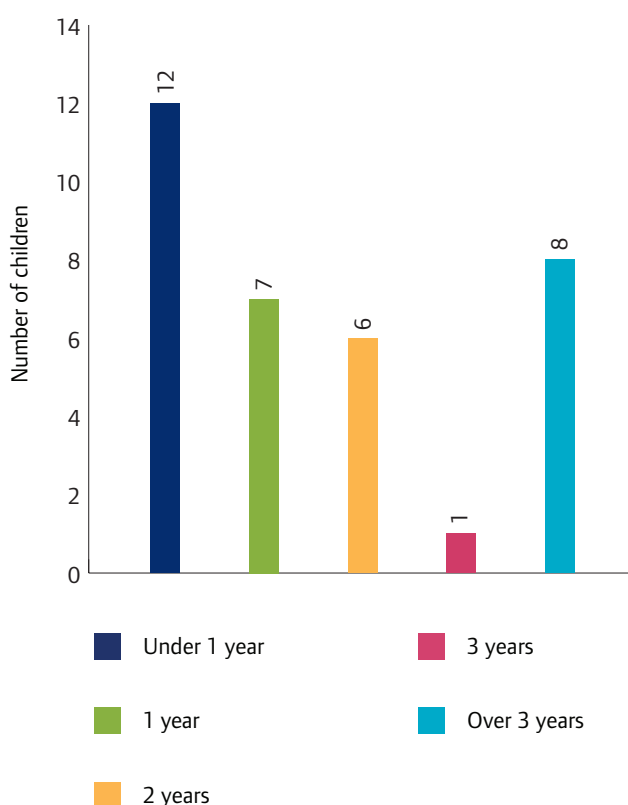
We must, however, be careful to say that the views in this report came from a fairly small number of children, and we were not able to get views from as many children as we had wanted. Some of the councils we contacted were not able to put us in touch with privately fostered children, and the report is about children's experiences in a small number (13) of all the councils in the country. What these 59 children told us is vitally important, and gives some very strong messages about their experiences of private fostering, but what they said may not be true for some of the children we could not get in touch with or did not hear from.

We also need to give another warning. We were only able to get the views of privately fostered children who local councils know about and so could put us in touch with. We know, though, that the Government is worried that there are many other private foster children who local councils do not know about, and the problem of finding out about these, and checking up on them, was discussed recently in Parliament. The experience of privately fostered children councils haven't been told about could be very different from the experiences of privately fostered children whose councils do know about them and are checking up on them. **This report is only about the experience of children in private foster homes that councils know about and are visiting.**

Out of the 34 privately fostered children who sent in their views through our survey, 23 (two thirds) were girls and one third were boys. None said that they had any sort of disability. Sixteen children (46%) said they were white, 10 (29%) that they were black, four that they were Asian and three that they were of mixed race. The youngest was aged eight and the oldest was 17. The 'middle age' was 14. We had survey answers sent in from children in 13 different council areas in England (out of 49 councils who told us they had privately fostered children in their areas and who agreed to send out our survey forms for us).

The chart below shows how long the children who answered our survey had lived with their present private foster carers. **Most had lived with their present carers for less than two years.**

How long children had been with their present carers





Five of the children in the survey had moved house since being with their present carers. No child had moved house more than once. One child in a discussion group told us they had lived with a number of different private foster carers, one after the other.

### Choosing carers

We asked the children in the survey to tell us who had arranged for them to move in with their private foster carers. The next chart shows what the children told us.

Who arranged the private foster carers?

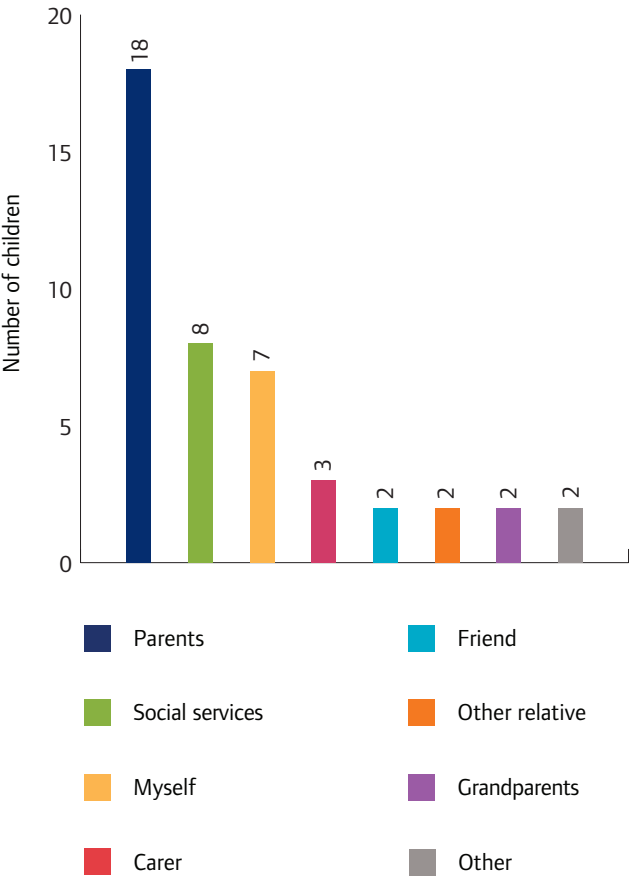


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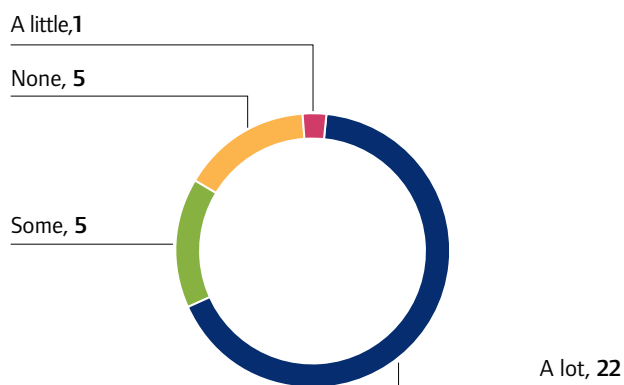
As we had expected, **the most usual people to arrange private foster care were the child’s own parents**. Parents had made the arrangements for about half the children in the survey. One child told us: ‘I was staying there until my mum got a place for me and her to move in. But my mum past away so I stay here all the time.’

**What was more of a surprise was that eight of the children (nearly a quarter) in our survey told us that social services had arranged their private foster care for them.** This is something that needs looking into further, because the whole point of private foster care is that it is something that is not arranged by social services. If social services do arrange a placement for a child, then it is not private foster care.

What may have happened is that people, including the children, were not sure who was actually arranging things. They may have been unsure whether social services were making the arrangements, rather than just knowing about them. By law, social services do have to be told about private fostering, but that is not the same thing as social services actually arranging the fostering. But whether a fostering placement is a private one or a social services one makes a big difference to the child, and if there is confusion about which of these a particular placement is, then it needs to be made clear.

The pie chart shows how much say the children in our survey told us they had in choosing their private foster carers.

How much say the child had



Children told us that most of them had a say in choosing their private foster parents. Over three quarters had either some say or a lot of say; two thirds had a lot of say. Seven of these children (one in five of all the children in our survey) told us that they had chosen their own private foster carers, which had then been agreed by the adults. We heard much the same from children in our discussion groups. Six children in the survey (17%) said they had little or no say. From our survey information, it was clear that children who had gone into their private placements less than two years ago had more say in choosing their placements than the children who had been privately fostered a longer time ago. So, at least for the children in our survey, the amount of say children have in this important decision has gone up recently.

Children in a discussion group told us it was just as important that **children should have a say in leaving a private placement if they felt they couldn't safely stay there any more, or if it was not working out.** They told us that they had found a problem with this though, because **social workers weren't able to offer them an alternative placement** if a private one wasn't working out. One child told us they had run away from their private placement and been picked up by the police. They told the police they didn't want to go back to the placement, but because they couldn't say why, the police still took them back. Their

social worker then said they couldn't move anywhere else as there wasn't an alternative placement they could have. The child said the social worker wasn't listening when they said they wanted to leave the placement.

Just over three quarters of the children in the survey (27 children) said they had known their private foster carers before they moved in with them: 'Friendly with the family for years', 'I knew her in Ghana before I came to live with her'. **Eight children (just over one in five) did not already know the carers they went to live with.** Again, there has been a recent change, at least for the children in our survey. Those who had been placed less than two years ago were more likely to know their carers already than those placed a longer time ago.

The children who already knew their new carers told us how they had got to know them. **For ten of the children, their new carer was already someone they knew as a friend of the family; for eight children their new carer used to be their parent's partner ('my Dad's girlfriend') or were the parents of their own parent's partner; and for another four they were relatives.** One child was placed with their godparents, and one was someone they had already met with their own parent for a completely different reason, when their parent was buying something from them. Three children told us they had not known their private foster carers already, but they had been visited by them so that they got to know them before they moved in.

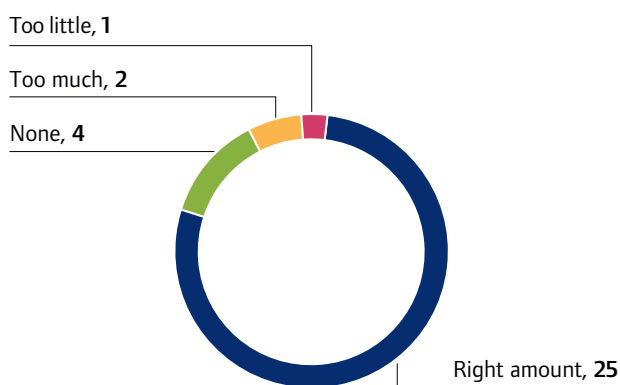
We heard from one group that many children had known they were coming to the UK and had been able to have a say in that decision, but did not know where they would be living in the UK or who they would be living with. Two in this group told us that they had been brought to the UK with friends of their father, who they didn't know. They had become attached to these people during the journey, but when they got off the plane they had been given to someone else.

The children in two of our discussion groups told us they thought that children should in future usually have a **trial stay** with their possible private foster carers, to see how things work out and find out what they are like.

## Telling children and carers about each other

The pie chart shows whether the children in the survey thought they had enough, or not enough, information about their new carers before they moved in.

How much information the child had about carers



**Over three quarters of the children thought they had been given the right amount of information about their new carers.** Very few had wanted more information, but those who did would have wanted to know earlier on where exactly they were going to live, how old their new carers were, and what would happen to them if things didn't work out.

We also asked the children what they thought private foster carers should always be told about a child who is going to move in with them. Here are the eight top things children in our survey thought carers should be told:

**The child's likes and dislikes** (from eight children)

**Everything about the child** (from seven children)

**About the child's past** (from five children)

**Basic things like gender and age** (from four children)

**How to look after the child** (from four children)

**The child's interests** (from four children)

**The child's medical history** (from four children)

**What special needs the child has** (from four children)

One group thought a **booklet giving details about their future carers** should be given to the child before they move in. This could also give information about the area they will be living in.

In one of our discussion groups, children took different views about just **how much private foster carers should be told about the child's past**. Some thought the carer should always know about the child's past, but others thought that very personal things should only be told when the child felt ready for their carers to know.

Some children who had come to the UK from other countries told us it was important that their carers are told **whether the child will be staying in the UK** and how the child feels about this.

These four quotes from children illustrate well the different kinds of things the children thought new private foster carers ought to know, both about the child they are going to look after and about being a private foster carer:

'that there will be tough times ahead but you will get through'

'how to treat the child and make sure that they are a good carer and that they will be there for the children'

'all about the young person so it will help the carer to understand the child better'

'what they have been through in life. Also just listen to what they want and just be there for them because its important'



## Telling the council about private fostering

The law says that anyone who is going to foster a child privately must tell the council they are going to do this beforehand, so that the council can arrange to check on things for the child.<sup>3</sup> The child's parents and anyone who is arranging a private fostering placement also has to tell the council. The Government wants to know whether this is working, and whether people are actually telling their councils as the law says they should. The children didn't necessarily know whether or not the council had been told about their private placement, but we asked them in our discussion groups for their ideas to make this more likely to happen.

In one group, one child told us they knew they had been living with their private foster carers for seven months before the council found out – when the child's school had told the council. Another child in the same group didn't know when the council had been told, but knew that it was 12 weeks after they moved in before a social worker visited to check things out for them. In a different group, in a different part of the country, one child told us that their social worker had not visited for months after they had moved in with their private foster carers, although again they didn't know when the council had been told about them. Councils have to make sure someone visits the child within a week, once they know about the placement. The children in our discussion groups were clear that councils need to know about every placement by the time the child moves in, and then to make sure they visit soon and regularly.

Most of the children in our discussion groups agreed that **parents and carers do not really know enough about having to tell social care services that they are going to look after someone else's child.** They thought more needs to be done to tell people about this. Some suggested posters and leaflets in public places, although they also thought that these may not be read enough.

## Visits from social workers

The new rules for private fostering make it very clear that each child must be visited regularly by their social worker, and that the social worker should always see the child on their own (away from their foster carers) when checking whether they are being looked after properly.

**Thirty-two of the children in the survey said they get visits from their social worker, but two said they did not.** One child told us: 'they didn't ring/visit from May 07 till April 08. When my social worker left in May 2007 I didn't get another until April 2008. They kept passing me over different social services teams and were going to close my case, when I still needed support and didn't get it. Also my carer hasn't had any support and she also needed it.'

From our survey information, **children who had gone into a private fostering placement less than two years ago were more likely to be visited at least every 12 weeks than the children who had been placed more than two years ago.**

The law says that every child should be visited at least every six weeks for the first year that they are privately fostered, and at least every 12 weeks after the first year. Thirty of the children in our survey told us how often their social worker visits them. **Fourteen of these said they had visits from their social worker every six weeks, and nine more said they were visited at least every three months. That makes up three quarters of the children who told us about visiting.** Another two said they were visited 'often' but couldn't say exactly how often. Three wrote that they were visited 'not often' or 'rarely', one that they were visited every four months, and one that they were visited every six months. **Altogether, a fifth of the 34 children in the survey told us they were not being visited by a social worker as often as the law says they must be.**

In our discussions, some children said that they had been visited often at first, but **because there were fewer visits from social workers after the first year, they had not had help at the time things started to go wrong.** As one child put it: 'professionals thought I was happy, but a few months later when things went sour they weren't there any more.'

<sup>3</sup> Where we refer to the law in this report, we mean The Children (Private Arrangements for Fostering) Regulations 2005.

**The most usual place for the social worker to see the child was in the private foster carers' home** – 32 of the children said their social worker usually saw them there – but six children said their social worker talked to them at school, three that they met their social worker at a family centre, and three that their social worker talked to them by taking them out to a public place or for a walk. 'They take you to a public place such as restaurants and talk to you.' One child summed this up by saying that talking out of the house is better, because no one listens.

The children told us that **the usual thing for their social worker to discuss with them was how they are getting on in their private placement**. Just over half the children told us they discussed this. One child summed it up: 'we talk about how I feel living with my carer, am I OK, is everything fine, school and much more.' Just over four out of ten said their social worker discussed their **feelings** with them, and just over four out of ten said their social worker talked to them about **school**. The other main subject to talk about was the **child's own home, family and how to keep in touch with their own family**.

Sometimes, though, social workers need to work harder to help the child to feel able to tell them about their worries: 'try really hard to get you to say what you are not allowed to say such as bullying.' Some children explained that it was harder to tell your worries to a social worker you didn't really know. The children in one discussion group told us that sometimes it was hard for them to tell the social worker something they wanted to say, because they were 'not really having a conversation, just 21 questions'. One summed it up for us by saying that each privately fostered child needs 'to be able to tell the social worker when they are no longer happy living with the carer'.

The law is clear that social workers doing their checking visits to private foster children must always speak to the child in private, unless this is for some reason not appropriate. One child described for us how their social worker could ask more difficult questions in private: 'when talking privately, my social worker asks me'. **Children told us their social worker does usually speak to them in private, although not on every visit. Twenty-five children (about three quarters of all the children) in our survey said their social worker always speaks to them in private, eight that their social worker 'sometimes' speaks to them in private, but one that their social worker never speaks to them in private.**

Most children in our groups said they do get the chance to speak to their social worker in private. One group told us that their social worker spent most of their time on visits speaking to their carers rather than with them. In one of our groups, every child out of the ten in the group said their social worker saw them in private at every visit, but in another group not one child out of the five in the group was seen in private on every visit. The best they could say was that social workers saw them in private 'sometimes'. One child said: 'sometimes they take you out but often the social worker speaks to you with foster carer there'. Another said that they felt they couldn't raise concerns with a 'social worker you don't really know and foster carer is there so you're intimidated and limited in what you can say'. These are the problems that privately fostered children told us about in 2005 and which led to the law being changed. There are still differences in how well it is being kept to.

One group we met told us that it is not good enough for social workers to ask children whether they want to see them in private when they visit. They said: '**asking "do you want to see me on your own?" is no good. It shouldn't be a choice. You should see the social worker on your own anyway.**' That is, of course, actually what the law says must happen.

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### Contacting social workers

The law says that councils must make sure that someone (like a social worker) visits any privately fostered child whenever the child asks for a visit (unless the child is being unreasonable about when they ask for visits).

Many children told us that they had been told how to get in touch with their social worker if they wanted to. In one group, every child said they had been given this information, though none had actually tried to get in touch with their social worker. In a different group, although the children had a phone number for their social worker, the children thought that it is hard to phone with a problem as they felt they could not do this from anywhere in the house.

We asked the children in our survey whether any of them had actually asked for a visit and, if so, what happened.

**Three children told us they had asked for a visit. Very different things happened. One child said their social worker had come round to see them 'asap'. One said their social worker didn't visit when the child asked them to. The third said their social worker didn't visit, but did speak to them on the phone.**

**Seven children told us they had tried to get in touch with their social worker between visits. Only two had found it easy to get in touch with their social worker. Four said it had been 'hard' and one that it had been 'very hard' to contact their social worker.** One told us it is 'not easy at all, there never there or put me on hold for a long time'. In our discussion groups, children told us that they thought they should always be given details of the best way of getting hold of their social worker when they needed to – perhaps by having their personal mobile phone number rather than trying to leave messages with people answering a phone in an office.

## What privately fostered children want from their social workers

The children we met all agreed that the main job they needed their social workers to do was to check that they are being looked after properly in their private foster homes. Most said that the main way social workers should do this was to ask the children themselves. We asked whether children wanted social workers to do anything in particular to check on how they are being looked after. The top proposal was to **keep in touch with the child by phoning** them. Next came the idea that social workers should **contact the child's school to ask if all is well**. The third main idea was that social workers should **pay surprise visits to private foster carers' houses**, when carers didn't know they would be coming. One of our groups thought that there should be a mixture of announced visits, so the child could be sure to be around and see the social worker on their own, and surprise visits to see how things were when a visit was not expected.

Some children we met in discussion groups gave us a list of how they thought social workers should check up on private fostering placements. They thought social workers should check with other professionals who knew the child, such as the doctor and the child's counsellor if they have one. Social workers should ask if they think everything is all right in the placement or whether there is something the social worker should check on, but they should not ask for personal information about the child. They should check how well the child is clothed and what clothing they have of their own. They should also check on who else lives in the same house. They should check the house itself, including things like food and bedrooms, and check with the school to make sure things are OK there and that the child is doing well and not being bullied. They should check with the child's birth parents to see if they have any worries and to find out whether they still see their child. Finally, they should stay in regular private contact with the child. One group also gave two warnings: first that, although they should always ask the child, social workers should also check things out for themselves, and not just assume everything is all right if the child hasn't said anything worrying. Second, they warned that social workers 'should be more untrusting at the beginning', before they were really sure that a private placement was safe for the child.

When we asked children in our survey what more special help was needed for privately fostered children, the top of the list was **more funding for private foster carers and children**. This was followed by **more support for the child with any problems they have**, and **help with school issues**. Two children said there was nothing more – social care services should just keep on checking on them.

On funding, one child told us that carers needed help to 'find money such as for things as clothes, hair straighteners and lady problems'. Another summed everything up by saying that private foster children need 'a decent social worker, more support, counselling, financial support, there own bedroom for space'.

One group told us more about some of the school issues that privately fostered children might need help with. This included **making sure the school knew about the private fostering arrangement**, because this could affect how the child is doing at school and how well they attend school. One child also told us that schools do need to be told so that they know who to write to about school – their school was still sending school information to their birth parents, even though the child had moved away, because nobody had told the school the child had moved into private fostering. The child did not feel they should be the one to tell the school their parents had changed.

Another group said that if privately fostered children do not speak English, they should be given **translation and language help**, both at home and at school.

Yet another group thought that **children coming into the UK and being privately fostered should be asked early on in their placement whether they wished to stay in the UK or return home in the future**. This group thought that those wishing to stay in the UK should be given advice on how to do well and learn at school.

In one group, children suggested that a good service would be for social workers to arrange for **groups of privately fostered children to meet** up together to share experiences and support each other if they wanted to.

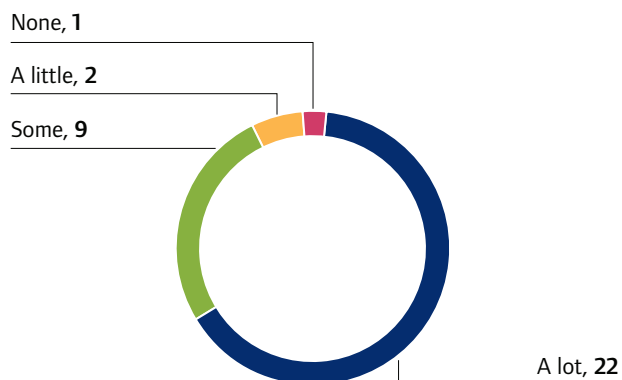
Finally, we heard during our discussions that it is **important for private fostering not to split up brothers and sisters**, and even if they are separated, for children to keep in touch and know what their siblings are doing.



## Having a say in everyday decisions

The next chart shows how much say the children in our survey said they had in everyday decisions about their lives as private foster children.

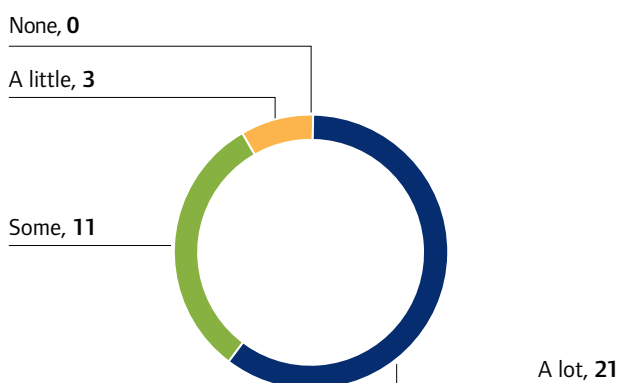
How much say children have in decisions



Clearly, **privately fostered children do usually have a say in decisions made about their daily lives**. Only one child in our survey said they had no say.

As well as having a say, it is important to know how much children feel their views are actually taken notice of. The next chart shows how much the children in our survey thought their views are listened to and taken notice of.

How much notice is taken of children's views



Again, according to the children in our survey, **the views of privately fostered children are usually taken notice of**. No child said their views were not taken notice of at all.

## Is the private placement right for the child?

And finally, we asked children in both our survey and our discussion groups whether they thought their private foster placement was right for them. In the survey, 32 out of the 34 children said yes, the placement was right for them. None of the children said their private placement was wrong for them. Two said they weren't sure about it. **Most of the children we were able to consult were therefore very clear that their private fostering placements were right for them**. We must, however, be careful not to say that this must therefore be true for everyone in a private placement, because we were not able to consult very many children.

Here are the five top reasons the children gave us for why their placement was right for them. They are in order, with the most usual one first:

**I am happy**

**My needs are met**

**I am loved and love my carers**

**I am well cared for**

**It's my home**

Some direct quotations from children illustrate how individuals felt about their private fostering placements:

*'I am happy and with people I love'*

*'I am better off here and not at home'*

*'I knew my carer and family before being fostered. I have grown closer to them. Now they are my family'*

*'I love my auntie and because of that I don't want to leave her so I want to stay for the sake of my life'*

## Next steps

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.

## Last word

A main finding of this report has been that, for the foster children who councils know about and we heard from, private fostering was working out well. The last word on this comes from the person who wrote this about our consultation and report:

'Thank you for asking me. I am pleased you want to improve your services although I think that they are fine just the way they are. I feel that being fostered actually benefits me. I get more opportunities to do things.'



### **Staff of the Children's Rights Director**

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