

# Making *not* Breaking

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS FOR  
OUR MOST VULNERABLE CHILDREN



Findings and recommendations  
of the Care Inquiry

Launched in the House of  
Commons on 30 April 2013

**The Care  
Inquiry**

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### **Click here for Care Inquiry supporting materials:**

The research evidence

The consultation with children and young people

Care Inquiry participants

The sponsoring charities

## SUMMARY POINTS

- 1 The Care Inquiry set out to investigate how best to provide stable and permanent homes for vulnerable children in England who – as a temporary or permanent measure – cannot live with their parents. We wanted to explore all the options that have a role to play in this: return home, kinship care, adoption, foster care, special guardianship and residential care.
- 2 Inquiry activities included several sessions with a broad range of participants with direct experience of care or the work of the care system. We also ran a consultation exercise with young people, facilitated a review of the research evidence by an academic group, responded to queries and submissions, and used social media to encourage a wide interest in the issues we were discussing.
- 3 Our main conclusion – from all that we heard and learnt – is that ‘permanence’ for children means ‘security, stability, love and a strong sense of identity and belonging’. This is not connected to legal status, and one route to permanence is not necessarily better than any other: each option is the right one for some children and young people. Adoption, although right for some children, will only ever provide permanence for a small number of children in care.
- 4 The work of the Inquiry left us in no doubt that the ‘care system’ continues to fail too many children and families, and that tackling this problem is increasingly urgent and requires a fresh approach. We must build on what we have learnt about the things that work well and about the things that must change. We must develop a more flexible response, so that support to children and families can vary in intensity and can be responsive to their needs rather than being determined by the child’s legal status.
- 5 In addition, we are witnessing increasing strain on the lives of vulnerable children and families as a result of changes to the benefit system and, through public sector budget restraints, a serious reduction in the ability of local authorities to discharge their duty of care to such vulnerable children and families.
- 6 The weight of evidence, from all quarters, convinces us that the **relationships** with people who care for and about children are the golden thread in children’s lives, and that the quality of a child’s relationships is the lens through which we should view what we do and plan to do. We have developed a set of recommendations that support this approach and that are consistent with the principles that underpin the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Human Rights Act.
- 7 The other key elements for action are about **involvement** in planning and decision making, about the moves or **transitions** that children and young people experience, about strengthening practice through **workforce development** and improvement, and about the **system change** needed to support implementation of the recommendations we have made.

## FOREWORD

In early 2012 eight chief executives of charities working with children and families in England got together to discuss the current approaches to finding permanent homes for children who, on a temporary or permanent basis, cannot live with their birth parents. The charities represented interests from across the spectrum of care options but, despite our different perspectives, we shared a common goal: that all children need security, stability, love, and a strong sense of identity and belonging.

The Care Inquiry set out to investigate how this goal could be achieved.

We are incredibly grateful to the parents, relatives, adopters, special guardians, foster carers, residential workers, academics, policy people and managers and practitioners at all levels and from across all services who contributed to the Inquiry. Particular thanks are due also to Janet Boddy who, with input from academic colleagues, reviewed the research evidence; to Dorit Braun, who chaired the first and third Inquiry sessions; to Bruce Clark and Ann Phoenix, who contributed significantly to the first session; to Gillian Schofield, who helped structure our thinking and contributed to the third session; to Kate Morris, who was a member of the steering group; and to the Nuffield Foundation, which contributed some funding and allowed us to use its rooms for the three sessions.

Special thanks go to all the children and young people who gave their time to work in focus groups, contribute to an online survey, and present their views at Inquiry sessions by film and in person.

Most of all we are indebted to Jo Tunnard and Mary Ryan, who co-ordinated the Inquiry with immense skill, helping to ensure that every voice was heard and valued. The charities involved are responsible for the recommendations, but Jo and Mary must take credit for the quality of the analysis and writing.

Our hope is that this report will act as a catalyst for change, ensuring that all options – return home, kinship care, adoption, foster care, special guardianship, and residential care – are seen as equally valid and are given the same political, financial and cultural priority. We hope that in future the support that children and their parents or carers receive will be based on need and not on legal status, and that relationships will be the lens through which we view what we do and plan to do.



**Robert Tapsfield**  
Chief Executive, the Fostering Network  
Chair of the Care Inquiry steering group

The Charities that came together to organise the Care Inquiry are Adoption UK, BAAF (British Association for Adoption and Fostering), Family Rights Group, the Fostering Network, Research in Practice, TACT, The Who Cares? Trust, and the Together Trust.

## Glossary of words used

**Carer** – used as appropriate for the meaning in the text. It can mean anyone who is providing day-to-day care for the child (parents, friends and relatives, adopters, foster and residential workers), or anyone caring for a child who is not living with their birth parents, or anyone who is not a parent (birth or adoptive).

**Children/young people** – used interchangeably, as appropriate for the meaning in the text.

**Child in care** – covers all 'looked-after children'.

**Kinship care** – includes all relatives who are caring for a child, regardless of their legal status. It is often referred to as 'family and friends' care.

**Relationship-based practice** – recognises the uniqueness and importance of the relationship between a practitioner, social worker or carer and the child or parent.

**School** – includes local authority schools, academies and free schools.

**Support care** – the term now used by the DfE for what used to be called 'shared care'.

**Those with care experience** – those who are or have been in care, including adults. They might have returned home from care, been adopted, or lived with foster carers, kinship carers or special guardians.

## I WHY WE HELD THE CARE INQUIRY

- 1.1 The Care Inquiry was set up in the summer of 2012 because of our shared concern that the government-led focus on increasing the numbers of children adopted from care runs the risk of distracting attention from the other options for permanence that are important for the majority of children in care or on the edge of care.
- 1.2 We are supportive of the Government's intention to speed up decision making, to ensure that children can move to live with permanent carers as quickly as possible, and to strengthen support after adoption. We want to see a similar commitment to improving the life chances of all vulnerable children. In particular, better support is needed for parents and other relatives to avoid unnecessary separation of children from their families and, when children do need to be removed, we need to bolster the support for everyone who can play a role in the child's life, now and in the longer term.
- 1.3 As a result, we set out to investigate how best to provide stable and permanent homes for vulnerable children in England who, as a temporary or permanent measure, cannot live with their birth parents. We wanted to explore all the options that have a role to play: return home, kinship care, adoption, foster care, special guardianship, and residential care.

## 2 WHAT WE DID

- 2.1 The eight charities running the Inquiry have a long history of working with children and young people in care or on the edge of care, with their families and carers, with the agencies providing services for families, and with the government departments with legal and policy overview of this area of work.
- 2.2 There have been five main elements of Care Inquiry work:

**A review of research evidence:** Academics, working as a group and with the Care Inquiry organisers, identified relevant studies and developed a paper that summarises current knowledge about the different routes to permanence for children. The paper was written by Janet Boddy and presented at the opening session of the Inquiry.

[Click here to view](#)

**Three Inquiry sessions:** The first session, *Making Sense of the Evidence*, looked at the changing trends in state intervention and the care population and the impact of these changes on achieving permanence; the second session, *Learning from the Lived Experience*, considered the views and experiences of children and young people, parents, kinship carers, foster carers, residential staff and adoptive parents; the third session, *Building Secure Futures*, identified the priorities for change to inform our recommendations. The three sessions were attended by a broad spectrum of 200 people with a keen interest in children in and close to the care system. [Click here to view](#)

**Consultation with children and young people:** The Who Cares? Trust organised and ran a number of discussion groups across the country for young people with different experiences of care. Representatives from each group spent a day working with the other Inquiry organisers, and a film and presentations by young people formed part of the third Inquiry session. A report of the views and recommendations emerging from the consultation exercise, and including an analysis of an online survey of a wider group of young people, forms part of the Inquiry materials. [Click here to view](#)

**A parliamentary briefing:** This was held in the House of Commons in December 2012, after the second Inquiry session, and gave peers and MPs the opportunity to hear from young people and carers and to discuss the themes emerging from the evidence.

**Social media activity:** In order to inform and involve as many people as possible, and make it easy for individuals and organisations to submit views, we set up a dedicated Pinterest site, used the websites of the member charities for regular updating, and made extensive use of Twitter during and between the Inquiry sessions and for some online interview sessions.

## 3 WHAT WE FOUND

### The need for urgent action and a fresh approach to the ‘care system’

- 3.1 We know that improving care is not a new problem. The work of the Inquiry, however, left us in no doubt that it is an important problem, is increasingly urgent, and requires a fresh approach.
- 3.2 It is **important** because it is about our most vulnerable children and because we continue to fail too many of them. Whilst care provides many children with a stable and loving home, for others it is a place of insecurity and fragmented relationships and, for some, a place of exploitation.
- 3.3 Care is regarded, and often referred to, as a national system, but time and again during the Inquiry sessions it was emphasised that stark local variations mean that we have as many systems as local authorities running them. The variations are about differences both between and within local authorities. The huge variation in the type and quality of service provided means that postcode rather than need continues to determine what is available for children, families and carers. We have endeavoured to understand what these local authority differences mean for children and families, and to use the good and the poor practice we heard about to draw lessons for future change.
- 3.4 It is an **increasingly urgent** problem because of the worsening context of people’s lives and the reduced ability of local authorities to discharge their duty of care to vulnerable children. The increase of poverty and unemployment has put additional strain on families in difficulties, which is compounded by changes to the benefit system. We heard repeatedly of how public spending cuts have led to a reduction in family support services and are having a negative impact on the support available to kinship carers, adoptive parents and special guardians. There has been a sharp rise in the number of children in care since 2008 (up 12 per cent, an increase of 7,650 children) but the recruitment of foster carers and adoptive parents, and the early identification of kinship carers, have not kept pace with the rise in children in care or on the edge of care.
- 3.5 A **fresh approach** is needed because earlier approaches have not enabled us to make enough progress in providing the best possible care for children. We need to rethink the purpose of care and the way in which we support the most vulnerable children and families who use the care system or might need to do so.
- 3.6 A more flexible response is needed, with support to families varying in intensity as their circumstances change, and with support based on need and not legal status. This is the approach that will help ensure that children in need can stay at home or return home safely, and that those unable to do so can be supported to develop and maintain permanent relationships with those who care for them and with others who are important to them.

- 3.7 This different approach will require shifts in practice, some of which will be helped or supported by the changes in policy and law that we identify in our recommendations.
- 3.8 We call the approach 'fresh' or 'different' – rather than 'new' – because what we are calling for is no more than what should be happening in practice already. A recurrent theme throughout all the sessions, and in the consultation with young people, was concern that the policy and practice guidance drafted in the light of messages from research and from consultation exercises ends up being ignored. We have concluded that, for many of the issues that we examined, what is needed is for the messages about good practice to be reinforced, rather than for new lines of inquiry to be pursued.

### **The importance of recognising the different routes to 'permanence'**

- 3.9 An important conclusion – from all that we heard and learnt – is that 'permanence' for children means 'security, stability, love and a strong sense of identity and belonging'. This is not connected to legal status, and one route to permanence is not necessarily better than any other: each option is the right one for some children and young people. Adoption, although right for some children, will only ever provide permanence for a small number of children in care.
- 3.10 The common starting point for the eight charities was acknowledgement that, wherever possible, children should be brought up within their families, as enshrined in Article 7 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), to which the UK is a signatory, and in line with the duty on local authorities in the Children Act 1989 (section 17) to promote the upbringing of children by their families.
- 3.11 For children returning home from care, proper preparation and support is vital. We must build on key messages from recent research and from practice developments about reunification: that work should continue with parents whilst children are in care, to address the problems leading to separation; that parents and children should be prepared for return home, because changes will have occurred during separation; and that the right support is in place. We should consider the 'intensive team around the family' approach for supporting return home, and we should find ways of using foster carers as an additional support for the child and family, including finding ways of keeping the foster placement open until the return home is secure.
- 3.12 We heard evidence of good outcomes overall for children placed with kinship carers. Kinship care needs to be recognised as a firm option in the care spectrum, and one that is suitable for all ages, not just older children and adolescents. It should be seen as equal to adoption in its ability to provide attachment, continuity and identity for babies and young children. Its use should be expanded, with attention paid to reducing the current variation across local authorities. Greater consistency in the use of kinship care should mean that it would be less likely in future to hear, as we did during the Inquiry, that a young woman caring for her sister's child was told by the child's social worker that what she was doing was unusual, or that a teacher told a young adult caring for his younger siblings that he wasn't a 'proper' parent.
- 3.13 A particular concern raised in the Inquiry is the lack of attention to this option by the Department for Education (DfE) expert group that is currently studying permanence for children in care. This is unfortunate, because it feeds the belief that kinship care is not the serious option that it is and should be for so many children.

- 3.14 There needs to be greater recognition, too, of the possibility for permanence (love, security and a sense of belonging) through long-term foster placements. Participants called for a proper structure for permanent foster care, including treating foster placements that are intended to be long term more like adoptive placements by calling it foster 'parenting', rather than 'caring', for example, and acknowledging the importance of the child's relationships with the extended family of the foster carers. We were urged to promote the expectation that children will be able to stay with their family beyond 18, as is now the norm for young people who are not in care. It was felt, too, that improving the support available to adults with a special guardianship order (SGO) would be a helpful way of encouraging more foster carers to apply to become a guardian.
- 3.15 Almost always it will be in a child's best interests to grow up in a family. But there will be some children and young people whose high level of needs will be met best in a specialist residential setting. This type of provision must be able to demonstrate that there is sound evidence underpinning their practice; that staff are trained, supervised and supported well; and that expert help and advice is available for staff and for the children in their care. The aim must be to provide children with stability and security, help them develop resilience and the ability to form good and lasting relationships and, most importantly, encourage and support them to realise their potential.
- 3.16 So, in responding to the needs of all children in care, we must find:
- ways of identifying those children who can go home, and enabling them to do so safely
  - ways of increasing the use of kinship care, and providing the right support
  - ways of increasing the use of adoption and other legal routes to permanence, and providing the right support
  - ways of recognising when long-term foster care can, and is, offering a permanent placement for a child
  - ways of ensuring that all these placements are of high quality and likely to last, and
  - ways of ensuring that the benefits of an option for a particular child will endure beyond childhood.

### **Relationships: 'the golden thread'**

- 3.17 At each stage of our work we found that the conversation was drawn back repeatedly to comments about the importance of relationships between children and those close to them and between the different people caring for or about them. This was strikingly so for those with the lived experience of being in or on the edge of care: as young people, as parents, as carers who were family members or foster carers or residential workers, and as adoptive parents. The importance of relationships was a central theme, too, for the academics and sector leads involved in our deliberations and for the practitioners and managers working with children and families.
- 3.18 High-quality relationships matter more than anything else for children in or on the edge of care, and for the adults in their lives. Given the strength of this message from the range of Inquiry activities, it is clear that we need a care system that places at its heart the quality and continuity of relationships, and that promotes and enhances the ability of those who are important to children – care givers and others – to provide the care and support they need.
- 3.19 Relationships for children in care are important for many reasons, and they serve a number of purposes. Many children, of different ages, need to build security through attachments, to develop

'felt security', and to build resilience. All need to understand their past and to build confidence in their ability to sustain relationships in the future. For many children and young people, work is needed to engage with members of the birth family so that past issues and negative interactions can be addressed, and so that positive relationships can be developed or restored, in part to help children and young people understand who they are. Other children will need help to understand why their family cannot provide them with safe or positive relationships, and how this has affected them or might do so in years to come.

- 3.20** In a world of shifting family relationships, in which children increasingly grow up with a wide range of connections that are seen as 'normal', we need to take stock of why our approach to children in care is so different. Why do we persist in breaking children's old relationships when we introduce them to future carers, despite knowing that so many children who do not happen to be in care manage to negotiate complex family relationships as they grow up?
- 3.21** Continuity of relationships is essential in helping children to construct their identity and to develop a strong sense of belonging, both of which are crucial to their wellbeing. The Inquiry heard how identity develops throughout life, but is particularly important in childhood; how an understanding of the past is an important aspect of developing one's identity; how race and culture are important elements in developing identity; and how we need to understand that all these aspects interact in a complex way. There were very clear messages to the Inquiry about the advantages for children of being able to grow up in a family that reflects their own culture, and of getting support to develop their understanding of their family history.
- 3.22** Whilst the importance of relationships is often implicit in what we already do for and with children, what has been missing is the determination to view relationships – their extent, their quality and the likelihood of their lasting – as the cornerstone of planning and practice. We need a renewed focus on using resources and approaches that will nurture positive relationships for children who cannot live with their parents. This must drive practice in the future – moving away from the focus on process and on administrative requirements that have come to dominate practice in recent years.
- 3.23** So, for example, an emergency placement, or a temporary placement with foster carers should, when appropriate, attract formal recognition as a long-term placement. In some such cases, foster carers who express an interest in becoming special guardians or adoptive parents for the child should be responded to positively, and in all cases the response should be quick and clear.
- 3.24** It follows from this compelling message that relationships should be the lens through which all work with individual children, family members and carers should be viewed. Relationships must also be the lens through which policy development should be tested, refined and reviewed. For these reasons, we have ordered our recommendations around this central theme of relationships, referred to during the Inquiry as 'the golden thread running through a child's life'.
- 3.25** We know what is valued by children, young people and adults who have been in care, or have been adopted or cared for through other routes to permanence. They value relationships with people who:
- are always there for them
  - love, accept and respect them for who they are
  - are ambitious for them and help them succeed
  - stick with them through thick and thin

- are willing to go the extra mile, and
- treat them as part of their family, or part of their life, beyond childhood and into adulthood.

**3.26** We know, also, that too many children in care or on the edge of the care system do not have this experience. The challenge for society is to determine how we ensure that every child has the opportunity to have such rewarding relationships.

## **Involvement, transition, workforce development, and system change**

**3.27** We identified four other important themes and made recommendations about them to underpin the required shift in focus to relationships.

### **Involvement: ‘including everyone who matters’**

**3.28** We were struck by the consistent messages about the importance of involving people in planning and decision making. Children and young people said that, too often, they were neither listened to nor involved in decisions about their lives. Adult family members felt the same about the way they were treated. People not involved intensively in the child’s plan, but who nevertheless saw themselves as a resource for the child, also wanted to be involved properly, so that children would know of their strong continuing sense of belonging and commitment.

**3.29** No one expects that their views will always prevail, but everyone is entitled to think that their views matter. In the care sphere, as in other aspects of life, people want to be asked what they think and, invariably, they understand that this is not synonymous with getting everything they want. It does mean being kept informed and invited to have your say, being listened to and feeling that your voice has been heard, and being told why and how your views have or have not been used. It is also about understanding your role in implementing decisions, and knowing what you can do if you are unhappy about what has been decided.

**3.30** This is not to say that involving people, or being involved oneself, is easy. It can be hard work to involve someone who has strong feelings, or has been upset by a decision, or holds an alternative view about what will be best for a child. The challenge for professionals is to give a clear message to children and adults that their contribution is valued, and then find ways of facilitating conversations so that people with different views can try and find practical solutions to difficult situations. This is the key to keeping relationships alive, between children and those important to them, and between the adults in their life. It is about practice skills in working with children and families. It is also about leadership skills in setting a strong vision about the value that an agency or service places on engaging pro-actively with the people they work with.

### **Transitions: ‘all moves count’**

**3.31** An improved focus on relationships means keeping their importance in mind whenever children and young people have to make a move. This applies to children moving between placements whilst in care. It is about children returning home or going to live with other family members, both of which options are desperately lacking in support for everyone involved, and rightly referred to as the ‘Cinderella’ transitions. It is also about children going to live with adults who will provide long-term care via fostering or adoption. And it is about young people negotiating the transition from childhood when they leave care as teenagers or young adults.

- 3.32 Problems were identified in all types of transition, with practical suggestions made for avoiding them in the first place as well as for dealing with difficulties that arise. The common theme was about systems and practice needing to be sensitive and flexible enough to promote and support good-quality relationships.
- 3.33 We were troubled by how frequently people reported the assumption that old relationships must be broken in order for new ones to be made. We heard this about all placement options. A respite foster carer told of being denied an invitation to a boy's adoption party on the grounds that he now had a future and she was part of his past. A mother described agreeing to her sons being adopted, reassured by the offer of continuing contact, only to find the decision reversed on her giving consent. A young person made the plea: 'When you are making changes to my life, don't stop what's already there.' By contrast, we heard of residential homes whose workers positively encouraged young people to come back and visit whenever they wanted to, and we heard adoptive parents describe the efforts they make to keep children in touch with birth relatives.
- 3.34 The transition from care to independent living was, inevitably, a cause of particular concern. There was a strong message about the need to make much greater efforts not to squander the progress children and young people make in long-term foster care through failing to have in place a leaving care system that offers young people and young adults strong and continuing support, including attention to relationships. The process of leaving care should become more gradual and more flexible, with support based on the needs of the young person rather than on their age, their previous legal status or their current education, employment or training situation.

### **Workforce development: 'changing the way we think and act'**

- 3.35 There was a call for a broad understanding of the term 'workforce', so that everyone involved with children – foster carers, kinship carers, adoptive parents and residential staff – has attention paid to their training and support needs. Carers and workers are expected to deal with difficult, often complex, situations, and they do so in the context of insufficient support for promoting continuity of relationships for children. They are not going to get this right for children without the time and expertise to make it work.
- 3.36 Social workers have an essential role in ensuring that children and young people's needs are met, including their need for continuity and for positive and purposeful connections. Given the wide variation in the knowledge and skills that underpin social work practice and decision making, and in the quality of direct work and arrangements for support and supervision, there is much to be done. The selection of social workers, and the training of those who have qualified, need to recognise the skilled nature of social work with children and young people who might, or do, come into care, as well as acknowledging the intellectual and emotional demands on staff.
- 3.37 Work with vulnerable people – about conflict and pain, loss and divided loyalties, inequality and discrimination – is difficult for everyone. Social workers, and residential staff and foster carers too, need to know that the demands made on them in doing excellent work with children and their families are matched by the determination of their managers to provide high-quality training, support and supervision. We have to be proactive and decisive about remedying our long-standing knowledge that the most vulnerable children and young people in residential care are often cared for by people who are less well qualified and supported than others in the sector.

- 3.38 Local leadership is key here – in establishing a strong culture, and in setting clear principles and expectations to guide the work of an authority or agency. This needs to be coupled with a determination to highlight and value what is good in practice, and a refusal to tolerate what is poor.
- 3.39 Whilst specific recommendations were made about social work selection, training, support and supervision, the important role of other professionals was also highlighted – especially that of teachers and other education staff, mental health professionals, youth workers and advocates. The way that agencies and disciplines do, or do not, work together impacts on outcomes for children and the experience of caregivers. Those working in education, health, the police and the legal system must bear in mind their ability to influence children's lives and connections. In part this is about the role of individuals in agencies. It is also about the attention needed to ensure that decisions taken in multi-agency settings are based on sound knowledge of the care system and the different routes to permanence for children, the evidence base for services that can make a difference to outcomes, and the circumstances of individual young people.
- 3.40 In relation to adults close to the child, a pervading theme of the evidence to the Inquiry was the continuing gap in ongoing work with a child's parents and immediate family when a child goes into care. The child's social worker has a vital role to play with the child **and** their family and wider network. This is so because of the importance of such work in helping sustain relationships if children do not return home, and because it is essential if return home is the plan for permanence.
- 3.41 Careful attention must be given to the support that will help children and adults understand past issues and cope with the future and, here too, the wider workforce has a role to play. The majority of children in care have very high levels of need, as do those who have left care to live permanently with relatives or adoptive parents, or have returned home. Those who have experienced difficult life experiences may need long-term help and support.
- 3.42 Access to specialist services might be needed, and a range of services must be in place throughout childhood and in young adulthood, to cater for the emergence of new needs as children grow older. Schools are of crucial importance in promoting children's emotional development and resilience. The good home/school relationship that is important for all children is just as important for children living away from their parents: with kinship carers, foster carers, adoptive parents or in residential care. So, too, is close liaison with other professionals working with the children or adults.
- 3.43 Finally, account must be taken of the changing nature of relationships over time. Foster carers, special guardians, adoptive parents and kinship carers can benefit from support to help them understand their role in acknowledging the continuing sense of belonging that many children have with people they no longer live with. Support, advice and advocacy can help parents, siblings and other relatives negotiate new arrangements for keeping in touch with children, understand and manage endings, and get the most for all involved from contact arrangements, including long-term support with letterbox and other contact when children have been adopted. It might be that some of this help will be provided more appropriately by a person or agency independent of the local authority.

**System change: ‘making it work for children’**

- 3.44 A focus on relationships requires some changes to the legal, policy and commissioning provisions that are relevant to the care system.
- 3.45 Key among these changes are those that can ensure that law and practice can reflect accurately the different ways in which children can achieve stability, security and a sense of identity and belonging. Also important, we were told, are the organisational changes that will support a more flexible approach to transitions. The Inquiry heard, too, about the need for much greater focus in inspection and commissioning on the quality of placements, including attention to ways of measuring longer-term outcomes for children.
- 3.46 As the Munro Review did for child protection, we must consider more carefully the impact of performance indicators, data collection, and a focus on process and risk avoidance on the way in which services are delivered for children on the edge of care, in care, and as they leave care. The test to apply is whether these serve to make or break relationships. If the latter, they should be revised or removed.

## 4 WHAT WE CONCLUDED

### **About relationships: ‘the golden thread’**

- Nurturing positive relationships through practice
- Supporting heritage and identity
- Planning for relationships
- Sustaining relationships for children placed away from home
- Providing long-term help and support
- Recognising and supporting changing perspectives over time
- Focusing on quality

### **About involvement: ‘including everyone who matters’**

- Involving children in decisions about their life
- Involving parents
- Involving carers and delegating decision making to them
- Involving those who have care experience in service development

### **About transitions: ‘all moves count’**

- Relationships when children and young people move or leave care, or when social workers change

### **About workforce development: ‘changing the way we think and act’**

- Social work skills, training, support and supervision
- Return home from care
- Fostering services' strategies and review mechanisms
- A particular role for schools and school support
- Valuing the work of residential staff and others in social care

### **About system change: ‘making it work for children’**

- Foster care as a recognised long-term placement
- Support for kinship care
- The IRO role in supporting children's relationships
- Reducing organisational change that disrupts relationships
- Greater attention to placement quality
- Legal changes to support an increased focus on relationships

## 5 RECOMMENDATIONS ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

### Nurturing positive relationships through practice

- 5.1 There must be a renewed focus at all levels on using the powers and resources of the statutory, voluntary and independent sector in nurturing positive and meaningful relationships for children who cannot stay with, or return to, their parents. This includes a primary focus on ensuring that all children have the opportunity to be part of a family where they feel loved and secure, that they belong and feel that this will endure throughout their life. If this cannot be with the family into which they were born, arrangements must be made to identify and resource an alternative family arrangement that meets these objectives.
- 5.2 Systems, procedure, process and practice must support this primary focus on relationships and family. All those involved at a professional level have a responsibility to ensure that they understand their contribution to this objective, and that their own relationships with children, families and other professionals facilitate this approach. To this end:
- Local authorities should be more willing to respond positively to requests to change the status of a placement when this will allow continuity of relationships.
  - Children should be placed as near as possible to their family home and school unless, in exceptional circumstances, their needs suggest otherwise. In such cases, planning should focus on ensuring continuity of key valued relationships for the child, whilst avoiding further moves if children wish to remain where they are.
  - Social workers, residential practitioners, other professionals and carers who have formed a good relationship with a child should be encouraged and supported to maintain contact when they – the adults – change job, or when the child enters or leaves care or moves to a new placement.
  - Local authorities should be required to consider the suitability of the match between the social worker and the child when allocating a social worker to a child in care, and they should give serious consideration to a request by a child for a change in social worker.

### Supporting heritage and identity

- 5.3 A relationship and family focus must enable the development of the child's identity, including their ethnicity, culture, religion, language, gender and sexuality. The development of identity is a complex area for children with complex relationships and support is key in enabling this. To provide the right support, carers and workers should:
- prioritise work to help children understand their identity and personal history
  - ensure that life-story work is available to all children, including those in kinship care, under a special guardianship order, or adopted
  - ensure that information about children is recorded well on files and is accessible, and that children in care and those who have been adopted from care or are the subject of a special guardianship order are supported when they read their file, and
  - ask questions, rather than make assumptions. Social workers and carers should talk about culture and identity with children and young people, to understand their views about their identity and to take account of their views when finding them a home.

## Planning for relationships

- 5.4 Everyone involved in working with and planning for children in care must take into account the range of people who may be, or may become, important to the child. Where appropriate, active consideration should be given to facilitating the relationships the child has, or wishes to have, with these people.
- 5.5 For each child or young person, social workers, carers and independent reviewing officers should ask themselves: 'Who will be there for this child or young person when they are 25 and beyond?' If they can answer this question, they should seek to strengthen and support the relationships that exist. Otherwise, they must be proactive about finding someone who will be there for the child when they are a young adult.
- 5.6 Given that sibling relationships are likely to be among the most long lasting and significant relationships in a child's life, siblings should be placed together unless there are strong evidence-based reasons for not doing so. In any such case, the future significance of these sibling relationships and their potential positive benefit should be recognised and actively developed.
- 5.7 In their inspections of local authorities and placement providers, Ofsted should give proper attention to how high-quality relationships are built and supported for children and young people in care, and whether robust plans are in place for supporting these relationships into adulthood.

## Sustaining relationships for children placed away from home

- 5.8 Social workers must ensure that children are helped to maintain or develop meaningful relationships with parents and other family members, and to have a continuing relationship with other people who are important to them.
- 5.9 The local authority should highlight the value of social workers continuing to work with a child's parents, and this should underpin practice, irrespective of whether the child is to return home.
- 5.10 Whatever long-term placement is desired for a child, social workers should have the skills, support and supervision that will enable the child's mother, father and other key family members to play a positive role in their child's life, including through contact.

## Providing long-term help and support

- 5.11 Due recognition must be given to the fact that the majority of children in care, or who live with kinship carers, adopters or special guardians, or have returned home from care, are likely to have high levels of need or emerging needs that might require long-term help and support.
- 5.12 Access to a range of services to respond to these needs, including specialist provision, must be in place throughout childhood and into adulthood. This should include counselling, family therapy, mediation, advocacy, and mental health services that have regard to the special circumstances of children in care and those adopted or living with kinship carers or special guardians.
- 5.13 To enable them to meet the lifetime needs of the children they care for, carers and adoptive parents must be able to access advice, guidance and support for themselves. This might be about promoting emotional wellbeing for children, dealing with the possible impact of change on different family members, responding to specific needs such as trauma and loss, and legal and financial matters. Practical help, and in particular respite care – with flexible provision, including day care and holiday play schemes – should also be available.

## Recognising and supporting changing perspectives over time

- 5.14 A person's perspective on who is important in their life might change over time. Families provide a secure base for recognising this and for enabling changes in perspective to occur. Foster carers, special guardians, adoptive parents and kinship carers need access to support that can help them understand their role, and understand the implications of the changes on the child and for themselves.

## Focusing on quality

- 5.15 Those responsible for commissioning and procuring placements for children should pay greater attention to issues of quality, and ways of measuring quality should include a focus on the support provided to help children develop and maintain relationships.
- 5.16 Focusing on quality requires greater clarity about the desired outcomes for a particular child and about ways of measuring progress towards achieving those outcomes, including measuring less tangible outcomes about children's wellbeing.

# 6 RECOMMENDATIONS ABOUT INVOLVEMENT

## Involving children in decisions about their life

- 6.1 Everyone involved in decisions about children in care must value the active contribution that children and young people can make to decisions about their life. This requires a willingness to promote and support that involvement.
- 6.2 Before any placement with carers who are unknown to the child, including in an emergency, children and young people should receive child-friendly information about the family and home to which they are moving, provided by the carers.
- 6.3 Unless a placement is very temporary, children should have a space that they can make their own, because this helps engender a feeling of belonging.
- 6.4 Children and young people should be fully involved in decisions about where, and with whom, they live, and their views must be taken into account. For example:
- local authorities should identify more than one suitable placement and should involve the child or young person in identifying which is best for them, and
  - other than when they move in an emergency, children and young people should visit or try out a placement before a final decision is made.

## Involving parents

- 6.5 Save in exceptional circumstances, parents should be helped to be involved constructively in planning and decision making for their child. This will enable children to have continuing relationships with people who are important to them.

### **Involving carers and delegating decision making to them**

- 6.6 The current carers of children in care must always be involved in planning and decision making about the child who is living with them and, when parents are involved in the child's life, responsibility for day-to-day and longer-term decision making must be discussed with them.
- 6.7 Day-to-day parenting decisions should be delegated to carers, with exceptions noted in the care plan. Responsibility for longer-term decisions, such as choice of school, will depend on the permanence plan for the child.
- 6.8 Foster carers should be treated by schools in the same way that they treat parents; they should be invited to meetings about the child and should be able to give consent to school activities.

### **Involving those who have care experience in service development**

- 6.9 Local authorities, adoption agencies, independent fostering agencies and children's homes should make good use of the knowledge and understanding of young people who are, or have been, in care, so that their experiences can help others in care and can help improve the quality of services provided. This should build on the positive achievements to date in encouraging, training and supporting young people to become independent visitors, mentors for younger children, members of adoption panels and participants in commissioning and inspections.

## **7 RECOMMENDATIONS ABOUT TRANSITIONS**

### **Relationships when children and young people move or leave care, or when social workers change**

- 7.1 Local authorities and carers (foster and residential) should work together to keep the child's last placement open until it is clear that the child's return home, or their permanent placement with relatives, foster carers or adoptive parents, is secure.
- 7.2 Local authorities should minimise the disruption to relationships caused by administrative changes in a child's social worker, such as when a child moves from one team to another. In particular, a social worker who knows a young person well should continue to be their social worker when they return home, or move to a permanent placement, or prepare for adulthood.
- 7.3 Local authorities should be required to identify who is likely to support the young person beyond age 25, and they should ensure that this person is a key part of any leaving care support arrangements.
- 7.4 Local authorities must ensure that carers with a good relationship with children are enabled to support them as they move home, move to a permanent placement, or move into and through the leaving care process.
- 7.5 Young people living in foster or residential care should be able to continue living there until they are 21 (or beyond, for those who have become part of their foster family), if that is what they wish and the carers or unit agree. If necessary, the level of support provided for the foster carers or residential unit should remain in place.

- 7.6 Those working with care leavers should focus as much on the psychological and emotional needs of the young people as on the practical aspects involved, and they should focus also on identifying the social and relationship networks that will be able to provide young people with ongoing support.
- 7.7 Inspections of local authorities should focus more on leaving care, with inspection frameworks including a clear emphasis on the importance of securing positive and purposeful relationships for young people that will last beyond age 25.

## 8 RECOMMENDATIONS ABOUT WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

### Social work skills, training, support and supervision

- 8.1 Social workers should have a sound knowledge base, as well as skills in working in partnership with families, children and young people, and professionals and others.
- 8.2 The length, focus and status of the generic qualifying programmes should reflect the practice challenges that social workers will face, including the full range of needs across the life cycle to ensure that social workers can work effectively with all family members. This should build upon the previous work of the Reform Board and now the College of Social Work.
- 8.3 Once qualified, specific attention should be given to the knowledge base needed for effective practice with children on the edge of care or in care, including an enhanced understanding of child and adolescent development, the legal and regulatory system, the messages from research, and on relationship-based and participative practice.
- 8.4 All qualifying training should provide opportunities for the development of skills in direct work with vulnerable children, young people and adults.
- 8.5 Social work post-qualifying training and supervision practice should ensure that social workers and their managers are equipped well for delivering and supporting therapeutic work with children and their families.

### Return home from care

- 8.6 Given the acknowledged lack of attention to planning and direct work when children return home from care, or when they live with kinship carers, a robust framework of professional practice must be developed and delivered, with the framework equivalent to that already existing for fostering and adoption work.
- 8.7 Where the plan is for the child to return home, local authorities should make greater use of the support that carers can offer.

## **Fostering services' strategies and review mechanisms**

- 8.8 Fostering services must have strategies in place to ensure that foster carers receive the training, supervision and support that will equip them to meet the needs of the children in their care.
- 8.9 Robust mechanisms must be in place so that, each year, fostering services review their strategies, including canvassing the views of foster carers about the training, support and supervision received or undertaken.

## **A particular role for schools and school support**

- 8.10 The inspection of all types of schools (local authority, academies, free schools) must focus on:
  - the evidence that schools give top priority to children in care in their admissions policy, and that they adhere to that policy
  - the success of schools in providing an effective education to children in care
  - the outcomes achieved by vulnerable young people and the strategies used to improve these outcomes
  - the effectiveness of the designated teacher for children in care
  - the effectiveness of the liaison between the school and the local authority virtual head teacher for children in care, in terms of monitoring progress and offering support
  - the quality of the school's communication with social workers and carers
  - the quality of information that teachers have about individual children, so they are aware of issues that might affect children's wellbeing or behaviour; and
  - the extent to which children in care are represented in school exclusion statistics, and the strategies used to prevent exclusion.

## **Valuing the work of residential staff and others in social care**

- 8.11 Staff employed in children's homes must have a qualification that is Level 3 or above.
- 8.12 The current Level 3 qualification should be strengthened to reflect better the need for knowledge and skills in work with young people, especially child and adolescent development, resilience, loss and trauma, and the importance of relationships and a sense of belonging.
- 8.13 In future, the manager of a children's home should be qualified as a social worker or equivalent, and should hold a recognised management qualification before taking up post. Managers already in post and not qualified should become qualified within the next two years.
- 8.14 Priority attention must be given to the quality and depth of continued training and development of residential staff and foster carers who support vulnerable children and young people.
- 8.15 To encourage retention of a high-quality committed workforce, recognised personal development programmes must be provided on a continuing basis, and this should be prioritised through government initiatives.

## 9 RECOMMENDATIONS ABOUT SYSTEM CHANGE

### Foster care as a recognised long-term placement

- 9.1 Local authorities should have a formal process for recognising when there is a plan for a child to be part of their foster family until they are at least 18. This plan should include details of support that can be provided by the authority if the child stays beyond 18.
- 9.2 In order to increase knowledge and understanding of long-term outcomes, local authorities should routinely record and analyse data on those children with such a plan for long-term foster care. This should feed into the SSDA 903 returns and the national analysis and reporting on children in care.

### Support for kinship care

- 9.3 Central and local government must view kinship care as a central part of planning for children's long-term stability and sense of belonging and must recognise and address the significant support needs of children raised in kinship care, irrespective of the child's legal status.
- 9.4 The provision of services should include the introduction of a 'kinship passport', which sets out the range of support and services available and gives kinship carers and the children they care for the right to an assessment of need.
- 9.5 Ofsted must recognise kinship care and incorporate into their inspections of local authorities an evaluation of the support and services provided.

### The IRO role in supporting children's relationships

- 9.6 Independent reviewing officers have the key role in conducting an effective review process that ensures that children's good relationships are recognised, supported and sustained. They are valued by children and carers when they know the child, see them before each review to find out how they are, and are prepared to stand up for what is right for the child. They must have the time to do this, they must be involved in any significant changes to the care plan between reviews, and they must have the status and authority to monitor and challenge practice and decision making from a child-centred perspective.
- 9.7 Local authority managers should review IRO caseloads to take account of the reduced role of the court in reviewing plans for a child and the increased expectations on IROs that flow from this change.

### Reducing organisational change that disrupts relationships

- 9.8 Local authorities must reduce the impact of organisational change that militates against sustaining positive relationships for children. The professional system should focus on supporting social workers to remain in post and in children's lives. Enabling this continuity should include:
- allowing social workers time for high-quality handover periods and endings, when they or children move

- introducing a three-month notice period for social workers working with children in care, to provide more effective handovers
- avoiding allocating a new social worker to a child in care where it is known that the worker will be leaving shortly
- providing opportunities for social worker promotion based on expert practice rather than management skills
- rewarding social workers for remaining in post in order to support children long term
- having strategies in place to minimise for children the number of changes in social worker and IRO, including changing how teams are structured, and
- careful planning of any necessary change in carer or support worker.

### **Greater attention to placement quality**

- 9.9 Frameworks for commissioning services for children in care and leaving care should require a minimum 60/40 weighting in favour of quality over cost.
- 9.10 Attention to quality should include a commitment to understanding more about the longer-term cost benefits of services for children in care and leaving care, with strenuous efforts to avoid focusing only on the short-term impact on individual agency budgets.
- 9.11 Inspections must focus on the quality of the care experience from the child's perspective.

### **Legal changes to support an increased focus on relationships**

- 9.12 The word 'legal' should be removed from the DfE policy definition of permanence, to ensure that the definition places equal value on all routes to permanence.
- 9.13 In light of the greater emphasis placed on speedier decision making by the courts, local authorities (working with their statutory partners) must ensure sufficient provision of local early help services to meet the needs of children, young people and families in their area. This should include:
  - identifying, and considering the willingness and suitability of, any relative or friend who could care for a child as an alternative to their becoming looked after by unrelated carers, and
  - offering parents the option of a family group conference prior to a child coming into care, so that the family has the opportunity to identify safe solutions.
- 9.14 Proper attention should be paid to the importance of identity. Courts and adoption agencies should continue to be under a duty to give due consideration to the child's religious persuasion, racial origin, and cultural and linguistic background. The welfare checklist in section 1(4) of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 should be amended accordingly.
- 9.15 There should be a duty on local authorities to promote contact between separated siblings, and sibling placements should continue to be an element of the care plan that is considered by the court.

**9.16** New duties in primary legislation should provide that:

- When a local authority decides that a child in care should return to the care of their parent, the local authority must assess and monitor the support needs of the child and the parent for as long as is necessary to safeguard and promote the child's welfare.
- If, after carrying out an assessment in accordance with the above, the local authority decides that the child or the parent has support needs, they must provide a child in care and, in the case of formerly accommodated children, offer to provide 'return home support services' to meet the identified support needs for as long as is necessary to safeguard and promote the child's welfare.

**9.17** In order to enable more unrelated foster carers to be able to become special guardians, special guardianship support should be strengthened so that:

- foster carers can continue to receive fees
- fees and allowances increase over the years
- young people subject to special guardianship orders are eligible for leaving care support, and
- the legislative and regulatory framework that covers special guardianship should mirror the framework that covers adoption support.



We asked children and young people for their views at a Care Inquiry session. These are some of the things they told us...

*'To make things work and to make things permanent you need to know where you're coming from. That's the most important thing for me.'*

*'You need stuff in common with the carers you live with. I was in an emergency care home and she wanted me to stay there and I wanted to stay. I had to leave because it was only emergency care.'*

*'Ask young people and children where they would like to live and in what sort of placement.'*

*'I've been in care since I was six and one of the things that really bugged me and annoyed me about social workers is that they think they know how you feel and they say "I know what you're going through" but they don't know what you're feeling. I think that everyone needs to listen properly to children and not make assumptions.'*

*'Nobody talked to me about going into care and moving away. I was very sad because I love my family so much and I didn't get to see them very often. My old social worker was very good. She got me moved down closer to my family.'*

*'Social services split up my family because my parents couldn't look after us all properly, which was fair enough, but they didn't have to punish us by splitting up a close relationship between me and my brothers and sisters by separating us all.'*

*'When I first came into care I was 15. My adoption had broken down and I didn't feel comfortable trying foster care. I tried residential care and I got moved to a home. They were just brilliant. They helped me turn my whole life around by getting me outside resources - therapeutic counselling and everything to help change what I was to who I am now.'*

*'I've been moved around eight times now and each time I had just got settled in. Stop moving me, and think about how I feel.'*

*'I think what's important is for the Government to stop making new laws and work instead with what we have already and try and develop it for the better. What's important is for them to try and find ways of catering for all of us as individuals so that we grow up and become successful young people who were in care, not young people who are not successful because they were in care.'*