

# Putting children at the heart of the care system.

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# Welcome and introduction

- Thank you.
- Independent Government adviser on Children in Care and Permanence.
- Regionalising Adoption and the RAA Leaders Group - 18 RAAs/80 LAs
- Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board.
- National Stability Board.
- *Review of Fostering in England*
- Qualified social worker.
- Parent of 5 children, 2 adopted children and birth triplets.
- Married to a Cleethorpes girl.

# I am going to focus on things:

1. Some truths about the care system
2. Overview of the latest statistics on children in care
3. Hearing and responding to the voice of children in care and care experienced people
4. The National Stability Forum

# Some Truths About the Care System



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# Some truths about the care system.

## System

1. All routes to permanence are equal and unique. There is no hierarchy and there is no template. What is best for the child over the longer term should be the focus.
2. Our Care System is inherently discriminatory. Too often access to entitlements and support are defined by legal status or stage of a statutory process. That is not right.
3. There is an imbalance between protecting and safeguarding children and promoting their stability and sense of belonging. We can't just save them from abuse and neglect, we must equally enable them to thrive in stable and permanent families.
4. Funding is constrained, and we need to secure best value from our resources.

## Practice

5. Birth parents should be held in mind, and included when they are ready, without being framed in a simplistic, blaming, and drain on our time and resources manner.
6. Children and young people in care and care experienced adults need ongoing support to develop their identity and to enable them to thrive across the lifespan.
7. The forming of a new family and the end of proceedings does not mean everybody lives happily ever after. Second families need the right multi-disciplinary and multi-agency support, at the right time and in the right place to enable them to thrive.

# Latest Statistics on Children in Care



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# Latest statistics on Children looked after year ending 31 March 2018.

- **Number of children in care** = 75,420, up 4% from 72,590 on 31 March 2017, continuing increases seen in recent years
- **Reasons** = 47,530 (63%) abuse or neglect, 11,270 (15%) family dysfunction, 5,980 (8%), family being in acute stress, 4,860 (6%) 'absent parenting' (UASC), 8% other.
- **Legal Status** = 55,240 (73%) care order, up from 40,090 (58%) in 2014 and 14,500 (19%) voluntary agreement, down from a peak of 19,320 (28%) in 2015.
- **Setting** = 55,200 (73%) foster placements, up 53,010 in 2017, but similar proportions to previous years. More have been placed with relative or friends, up steadily from 14% in 2014 to 18% in 2018. 11% in secure units, children homes and semi-independent living arrangements and 6% placed with parents.
- **Locality**: 44,450 (59%) live inside the LA boundary and 30,670 (41%) live outside, similar to last year. 55,740 (74%) within 20 miles of their home. This value varies, 79% of foster placements within 20 miles but only 41% for adoption.

# Children who ceased to be looked after year ending 31 March 2018.

- 29,860 children ceased to be looked after, a fall of 5% from 31,410.
- 31% returned home to their parents.
- 3,820 (13%) Adopted (down from 5,360 in 2015 and 4,370 in 2017)
- 3,430 (11%) Special Guardianship Order in 2018, down 8% from 3,720 in 2017. 54% of these were special guardianship orders made to former foster carers.
- 1,170 children ceased to be looked after due to a residence or child arrangement order, a decrease of 3% on 2016/17.
- Adoption orders decreased by 13%; SGOs by 8%; and Child Arrangement Orders by 3% on 2016/17.
- Overall, permanence orders decreased by 9.5%.



# Health and behavioural outcomes for looked after children

- **Offending rates** - 4% (1,510 children) of looked after children 10+ were convicted or subject to youth cautions. Looked after children (who have been looked after for at least 12 months) are 5 times more likely to offend.
- **Substance misuse** - 4% were identified as having a substance misuse problem. 46% of these received an intervention for their substance misuse problem, down slightly from 49% last year and 50% in 2016
- **Health care and development** - 85% up to date with their immunisations, 88% had their annual health check, 84% had their teeth checked by a dentist, compared to 83% in 2017 and 84% in 2016.
- **SDQ Scores** - 78%) had a SDQ score reported, up from 76% in 2017 and 75% in 2016. Almost half (49%) of children looked after continuously for at least 12 months had 'normal' emotional and behavioural health, 12% had 'borderline' scores and 39% had scores which were a cause for concern.

# LAs are expected to stay in touch with care leavers and provide statutory support to support transition to living independently

- **Former care leavers** - local authorities were in touch with 88% of 19 to 21 year olds
- **Activity of Care Leavers** - For 19 to 21, 6% were known to be in higher education, 20% were in other education, 25% were in training or employment and 39% were known to be not in education, employment or training. For 17 year olds, 35% were in education, 14% in training or employment and 28% were not in employment, education or training and for 18 year olds the figures were 48%, 17% and 30%.
- **Accommodation of care leavers** - For 19 to 21 year old care leavers, 35% were living independently, 12% were living in semi-independent transitional accommodation, 12% were living with parents or relatives and 8% were living with former foster carers, similar to last year.
- **Staying Put** - Increased slightly from 25% in 2017 to 26% in 2018. In 2018, 1,800 (55%) children who ceased to be looked after in a foster placement aged 18 remained with their foster carers 3 months after their 18th birthday. This is up from 51% last year.

Hearing and responding to the voice of children in care  
and care experienced people.



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## Why is hearing the voice of children and young people important?

- Children feel listened to
- When children are involved, plans are more successful
- We can see their experience, from their point of view
- Children can develop their own story about what is happening in their lives

“Spending time with children, talking to them, and making sure that you are actively listening and taking seriously what they say is an essential safeguarding activity.”

NCB (2006)

# Why is it so difficult to hear children and young people?

- Staff skills, confidence and time.
- Children and young people come into contact with large numbers of professionals.
- Systems are inherently disempowering.
- Communicating with children and young people who have experienced multiple adversity and trauma can be challenging. This can lead workers to think that the child or young person is not engaging or cannot be engaged.
- More robust reflection and support is necessary to help practitioners explore whether they are adequately skilled and confident in their ability to communicate and to build relationships with children and young people.
- The organisational context must also support and facilitate these practice efforts.

# Children and young people know what they want from children's social care staff and other adults

- Get to know us; spend time with us and give us your attention
- Don't get us to repeat our story over and over again
- Keep us at the centre of the decisions you make
- Be honest with us and explain in a way we can understand
- Let us make some decisions about our own life
- Don't make assumptions about our thoughts and feelings



# We heard from many children and young people throughout our review of fostering

- They told us about the positive aspects of fostering such as feeling safe, belonging, being loved, feeling part of the family, and having a 'normal life'.
- Placing them - matching them - with a family who are able and willing to offer that is vital.
- Children and young people invariably stressed the importance of positive relationships with foster carers, particularly as a means to placement stability



# But children and young people also told us that...

- Physical contact and affection are missing from care (**Love**)
- They want a choice where they live and an opportunity to express personal preferences, for example living near wild life (**Choice**)
- They move around too much (**Stability**)
- Are made to feel different to other children (**Normal**)
- Don't always feel a sense of belonging (**Stability**)
- Too often relationships are broken rather than built and sustained – ongoing time with siblings, birth relatives, friends, residential care staff, foster carers (**Relationships**)
- They don't have enough of an understanding of their past and what has happened in their lives. Identity and life story work is inadequate (**Identity**)



# Care experienced people want us to change the way we talk about them.



**My Home**

**Family Time**

**Young Person**

**Parents / Family**

**My Plan**

**Teacher**

**Brothers and Sisters**

**Limited Choice**

**NOT**

**NOT**

**NOT**

**NOT**

**NOT**

**NOT**

**NOT**

**NOT**



**Placement**

**Contact**

**LAC**

**Birth Parents**

**Care Plan**

**Designated Teacher**

**Siblings**

**Hard to Place**

# They also want us to write about them differently, for case records to be more humanised and referrals to be strengths based.

- Social work records serve two broad functions
  1. recording practice which encompasses what is captured, collected and written about a person receiving support. This is usually recorded by the social worker; and
  2. access to that information by the person, usually through the process of contacting the local authority.
- There is not a one-size-fits-all solution to how records should be recorded and accessed but certainly we tend to focus more on the present and accountability. Ultimately case records are care experienced people's diaries, they form essential parts of their life histories.
- There is a tendency to describe children using deficit-based accounts, apparently drawing on the rationale for the child's original admission into care. It is important to identify critical issues and risks that will need to be managed by a care setting, but overly negative referrals can lead to unnecessary anxiety and tension and refusal.

# Social media has become a part of everyday life, with positive and negative consequences for the way the care system operates.

- All families have easier access to a peer group of people in a similar situation to them.
- Social media is allowing young people to trace their birth families more easily and from an earlier age than previously.
- Birth families can also make contact this way.
- But we can't blame Facebook!
- Managing identity issues and a desire to reconnect with birth parents at adolescence has always been an issue.
- Practice needs to consider the best way to prepare young people to manage this kind of communication as they get older, rather than hoping it can be avoided.

# The National Stability Forum



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# Introducing the National Stability Forum

For too long care has been considered in silos, by the legal definition, the stage in the process, the care setting.

In response to our review of fostering, the Government has established the National Stability Forum with the aim of improving stability for all children in care, leading to better outcomes for those children and to more children finding ‘a permanence in their care and sense of belonging, which lasts well beyond the age of majority.’

# There are good reasons why we should all focus on stability for children in care.

**Stability Enables Relationships**

**Stability Helps To Improve Outcomes**

**Children Want Stability**

**Instability Is Too High**

**Stability Secures Greater Value**

# Stability in care enables stable relationships and helps to improve outcomes

## Stability Enables Relationships

Children in care tell us that they want consistent, high quality relationships that provide security and support. For them, just like every other child, stable relationships and a secure environment provide a sense of belonging and identity. Where there is instability, relationships with trusted adults and other children suffer, succeeding at school becomes more difficult and vulnerability increases. This leads some children to fall through the gaps – vulnerable to exclusion, exploitation and abuse.

## Stability Helps To Improve Outcomes

- Placement stability promotes positive outcomes for children and young people in care. Stein (2005, quoted in Baginsky 2017) found that looked after children who experience stable placements are more likely to be resilient; securely attached; succeed educationally; be in work; settle in and manage their accommodation after leaving care; feel better about themselves; and achieve satisfactory social integration in adulthood.
- Conversely, placement instability contributes to a range of poor outcomes, including increased risk of offending behaviour (Schofield et al, 2014 and Rock et al, 2013) and poorer educational outcomes (Sebba et al, 2015).

# Looked-after children consistently say that stability is the most important aspect of their experience of care.

## Children Want It

- Children in care consistently say they want stability.
- During our review of fostering, children and young people told us about the positive aspects of fostering such as feeling safe, belonging, being loved, feeling part of the family, and having a 'normal life'.
- Too many children experienced numerous moves, often not informed about why they had to leave and why they were moving to a new home. There was also little detail of the timing of such a move and, as a consequence, too little time to prepare. And they never saw them again.

## Instability is High

- Too many children in care experience high levels of instability, where a change in home, change in social worker or change in school.
- LAs will not always get a match right first time, or even a second or third time in some cases. Some homes are always intended to be short term and moves between homes are frequently necessary, and many - quite properly - are planned. But, the number of moves remains too high and too many moves are unplanned.
- Social worker changes remain significantly more common than placement or school changes.



# Looked-after children consistently say that stability is the most important aspect of their experience of care.

## Securing Value

'Value' in the care system is achieved when resources deliver stability. This requires:

- Social workers using strengths-based assessments and consistently communicating children's needs
- Providing brokers with the right information to make referrals to providers
- Commissioners having the strategic intelligence to guide and develop the market around needs
- Providers focuses on meeting needs explicitly and not pricing in a risk premium
- Needs and spend corelated and ensuring financial planning and control
- Being confident at a population- level, that we are collectively helping children in care to secure stability.

# The National Stability Forum for Children's Social Care will provide leadership across the sector, bringing together leaders to:

## **Outcomes not Settings**

Take a national policy approach to improving looked-after children's stability, moving thinking on children in the care system towards the outcomes we want for them and away from type of settings or legal order.

## **Better Use of Data**

Use data to review current activity across the care sector to address stability, consider whether it is right and whether it is being properly prioritised

## **Drive Activity**

Drive the right activity across the sector's constituent parts to address the agreed issues and promote effective practice and delivery of routes to permanence.

## **Tackle the Big Challenges**

Influence the DfE's strategic thinking and help the government, delivery bodies (national, regional and local) and users to tackle some of the biggest challenges facing the children's social care sector.

# In terms of the numbers, the latest data from the Adoption and Special Guardianship Board highlights the challenges.

- Director General, Social Care, Mobility and Disadvantage (Chair)
- Chief Social Worker for Children and Families
- ADCS President (or nominee)
- Chair of the Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board
- Chair of the Residential Care Leadership Board
- One of the co-authors of the Foster Care in England Report

Membership is drawn from sector bodies, but members are invited in their own capacities, bringing their own insight and opinions to the discussions and decisions. Members are not to use the Forum to lobby for resources.

Other individuals or organisations will be invited to attend meetings.

# We do not have a good enough understanding of how the care system is operating

- The current data on stability for children in care and permanence and how it is presented does not provide adequate or coherent insight to allow for national stewardship and scrutiny.
- Critically, the NSF wants to routinely understand the care system through the voices of the children and young people it is designed to serve:
  - the quality of looked-after children's care experience and their sense of well-being; and
  - the thoughts, feelings and experiences of care experienced people, those that have left the care system.
- Similarly, we should routinely hear the voices of families - birth families, special guardians, kinship carers, foster parents and adopters; and from the professionals (e.g. residential care staff) that support children and families. This needs to be done in an authentic and genuine way capturing the full spectrum of experiences.

# A long-term aim should be datasets that enable five levels of scrutiny

1. *Strategic* - what is needed to understand trends and inform political decisions
2. *Service* - individual-level data on children, carers etc to inform individual management decisions
3. *Quality* - to enable the monitoring of current provision by service managers, and test whether services are delivering value
4. *Evaluation* - retrospective data on what worked
5. *Accountability* - a combination of those four things to enable individuals at each level to be held to account

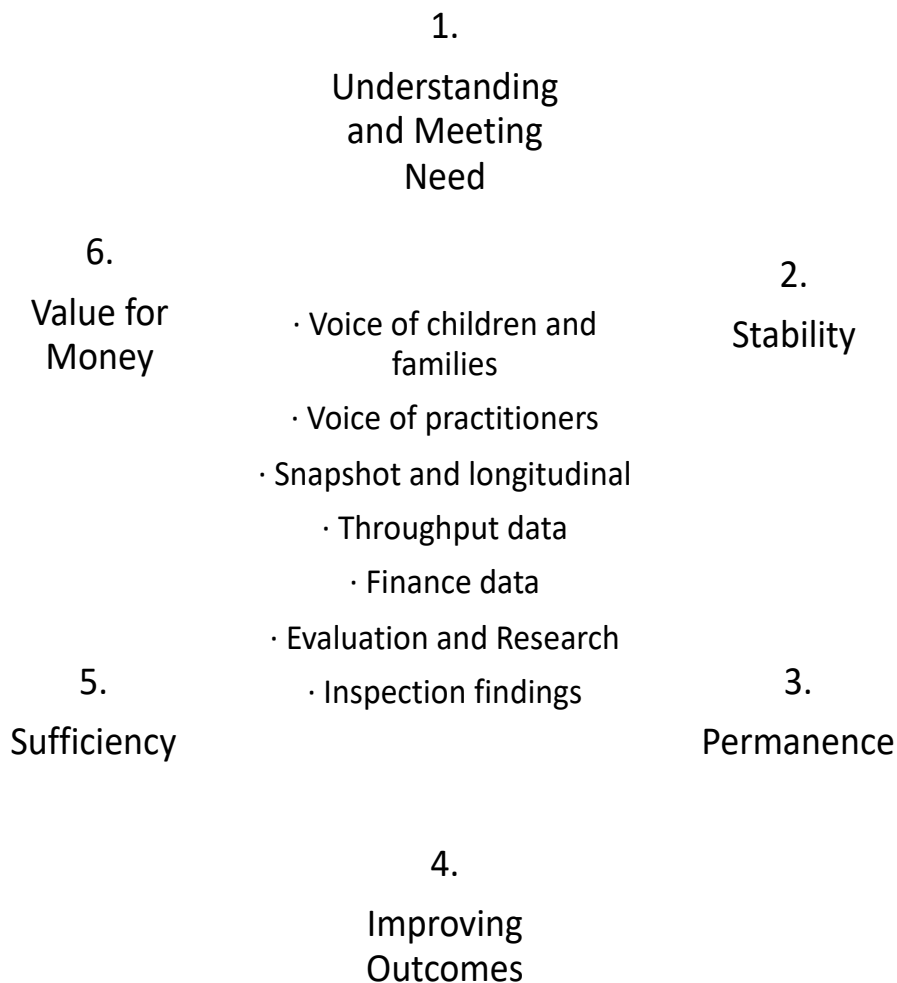
The NSF might want oversight of all these datasets, but the 'strategic' level data would be most relevant to its considerations. The right answer might not be central government collecting more information; local government could lead best practice to understand value and need, with strategic-level data collected nationally. Ofsted might also have a role to play in looking at how LAs engage with their children.

# We have developed a framework of 6 domains to understand the system and factors that contribute towards the costs of care.

NSF

National Stability Forum

Proposed Data  
and Information  
Framework



# We need to understand and meet needs, get better at ensuring stability and enable children to achieve permanence.

## Understanding and Meeting Needs

What are the needs of children in the care system? To what extent are children's needs being met by the care system? Have we got the right children in the care? Are the thresholds for entry into care right and how do they vary by area? To what extent are the needs of children in the care system changing over time?

## Stability

Do children in care have a stable home? Are children in the right home? Do children in care have access to the best schools and are they supported to stay in these schools? Do children in care have consistency of social worker? How do children in care experience instability? What are the causes and consequences of instability? What works to improve stability for children in care? Are providers effectively incentivised to provide stability?

## Permanence

Are children in the right permanence home? Are children achieving permanence without unnecessary delay? Do children in their permanent home and their families have access to high-quality support from day one to adulthood and beyond?

# We need to improve outcomes, ensure enough provision and deliver value for money.

## Improving Outcomes

What do care experienced people think about the care system? What does a good care experience look like? How likely are children to enjoy a good care experience? What are the outcomes for people who experience care? How effectively are statutory partners (health, education, police, housing) supporting improved outcomes?

## Sufficiency

What is the demand for care placements and permanence options? Do we have enough and the right quality residential placements, adopters and foster families to meet demand? What is the demand for support services?

## Value for Money

Is there a correlation (or a mismatch) between needs and costs and costs and outcomes? To what extent are placement decisions driven by price and/or availability rather than a child's needs. How do the views of children in care and their families inform value for money considerations?



# Things You Might Want to Take Away



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# Things you might want to take away from my presentation.

1. Celebrate what you do well and talk positively about care – it is not a system, it is not a process, it is a child's childhood and you are helping them to make happier memories.
2. Really get to know the children in your care, spend time with them and give them your attention. Be honest with them and let them make some decisions about their own life.
3. Love children in care and encourage more physical contact and affection
4. Seek to build not break relationships and encourage and facilitate children to spend time with siblings, birth relatives, friends and previous carers.
5. Produce strengths-based referrals and ensure that, inadvertently, they do not demonise a child by over emphasising the negative aspects of their experience and background.
6. Humanise your language as if you were talking to your own family and friends.
7. Always record your case notes knowing that children and young people will read them one day life a diary or life history book.
8. Treat all routes to permanence equally and uniquely, all children should have the same chances to live a happy, healthy and rewarding life.
9. Regard stability as important as safeguarding, children need to both in equal measure.

Thank you for listening!

Do you have any questions?

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