

BECOME.

THE CHARITY FOR CHILDREN IN CARE
AND YOUNG CARE LEAVERS

Response to the Department for Education consultation on its statutory guidance 'Working Together to Safeguard Children'

September 2023

About Become

[Become](#) is the national charity for care-experienced children and young people. We put young people at the heart of everything we do, supporting them to get the help they need now and empowering them to bring about change in their own lives, the care system and society.

Introduction

Our response is informed by the voice, views, insights and experiences of the care-experienced children and young people who we work with. During the consultation period, between June and September 2023, we undertook the following to inform our response:

- Distribution of a short survey to care-experienced children and young people who we work with, to understand how they want agencies to work better together in safeguarding, with a particular focus on the role of education, accountability mechanisms, and the experiences of disabled children who have experience of the care system.
- Workshops with our staff who provide advice and support services for care-experienced young people, to gather their views and insights on the particular experiences and safeguarding needs of children with care experience, and to hear about their experiences of local multi-agency safeguarding.

A number of quotes are provided throughout this response. These quotes are anonymised and, in all cases, we clearly indicate whether they are attributable to our staff or to a young person. All quotes attributed to young people are from care-experienced children and young people between the ages of 13 and 27.

Our focus is on improving the experiences, opportunities and outcomes for children in care and young care leavers. Consequently, we have only responded to the parts of this consultation relevant to this focus, as these are the areas where we feel we are able to provide the most valuable insights.

Our Response

1. We want to hear from children in care and care leavers, as well as others in this consultation. Are you: a child or young person, under 18; a care leaver up to age 25; an adult; an organisation.

An organisation

If you are responding on behalf of an organisation, what is the name of your organisation?

Become Charity

2. To help us analyse our responses, could you please tell us in what capacity you are responding to this consultation.

Voluntary, community and charity workers

3. If you are responding on behalf of an organisation, what is your role within that organisation? Frontline practitioner; Management; Senior leader (Director, Chief Executive); Corporate / Administrative

Corporate / Administrative

4. Would you like us to keep your responses confidential?

No

5. In sharing findings from this consultation, may we quote from your response?

Yes, attributable to my organisation

6. This question is only for adults over the age of 18, or organisations. May we contact you if we have any follow-up questions about your response?

Yes

If you are content to be contacted, please provide your email address.

mark.paul@becomecharity.org.uk

7. Do you agree that we should change the title of Working Together to reflect help and protection for children and families?

N/A¹

8. To what extent do you agree that the four principles are the right ones to drive better practice and engagement with parents and carers?

N/A

9. To what extent do you think the new expectations for multi-agency working will support leaders and practitioners to work together more effectively and improve outcomes for children and their families?

Likely

10. Is there anything else you want to comment on in A Shared Endeavour?

We agree that the new expectations for multi-agency working will support leaders and practitioners to work together more effectively, inasmuch that we are supportive of the direction these expectations set.

In particular, young people told us that they wanted agencies to collaborate and share information more effectively. One told us that “there was a huge lack of communication” between agencies in their experience, and that this urgently needed to change. Effective collaboration and information-sharing between agencies is even more crucial in safeguarding arrangements for care-experienced children. That’s because, for many children in care, significant instability in terms of placement, school and social worker changes is commonplace, as is involvement with a large number of agencies at any given

¹ Here, and throughout, ‘N/A’ should be understood to denote that we have declined to respond.

time. We are therefore supportive of the clear statement of the expectation found in the draft guidance that agencies should ‘collaborate’ at every level.

One of the young people we spoke to explained that, in their experience, “when something goes wrong; fingers will be pointed” between agencies. Separately, another young person told us that, in their experience, agencies “are rarely accountable, and it often feels defensive” whenever they spoke out about something that didn’t feel right. In the interests of improving outcomes, it is crucial that a learning culture that welcomes constructive mutual challenge exists at every level. We know, however, that this is not the present reality in some agencies and areas.

Whilst we are supportive of the direction set, we feel it necessary to note that, in some parts of the system, according to what we have heard from young people, significant changes will be needed if these expectations are to be fully met. At the same time, local authorities and many other agencies are under significant funding and staffing pressures. Local authorities have faced such significant funding pressures that spending on early help has halved in the last decade, with reductions of up to 80% in the poorest areas according to the Children's Services Funding Alliance.² As for staffing, taking social work as one example among many, one in five posts were vacant as at 30th September 2022.³

We are concerned that these pressures will frustrate attempts to meet the expectations set out in the draft guidance in some parts of the system. This concern strengthens rather than diminishes our support for setting extensive and clear expectations to apply to all agencies involved in local multi-agency safeguarding. In our view, the expectation to ‘resource’ safeguarding activities appropriately is particularly critical. The draft guidance sets out an expectation that managers “ensure children receive the holistic support they need, drawing in expertise from a wide range of agencies”. Given the substantial reductions in funding for early help, this feels unachievable in many parts of the system at the moment without more sufficient resourcing. For this reason, we particularly welcome the setting out of this expectation in statutory guidance, although we would welcome revisions that set this out more extensively and more stringently, to ensure that the most vulnerable children receive the holistic support they need.

² National Children’s Bureau (2021), “Councils forced to halve spending on early help services for vulnerable children”. Available at: <https://www.ncb.org.uk/about-us/media-centre/news-opinion/councils-forced-halve-spending-early-help>.

³ Department for Education (2023), “Children’s Social Work Workforce”. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-s-social-work-workforce>.

11. To what extent do you agree that these proposed changes provide greater clarity on what the expectations are of safeguarding partners?

N/A

12. To what extent do you agree with the joint functions listed for Lead Safeguarding Partners and Delegated Safeguarding Partners?

N/A

13. In your local area, how would delegation from the lead safeguarding partner to delegated safeguarding partner be interpreted and delivered in practice?

N/A

14. To what extent do you agree that having a mutually agreed representative from a safeguarding partner agency will increase ownership and accountability of partners?

N/A

15. To what extent do you agree that these proposed changes will strengthen the role of education in multi-agency safeguarding arrangements?

Agree

16. To what extent do you agree that making education a statutory safeguarding partner is the only way to secure the right level of collaboration in multi-agency arrangements?

Neither agree nor disagree

17. Do you agree the proposed changes will encourage more engagement with VCSE and sports clubs as part of multi-agency safeguarding arrangements?

N/A

18. To what extent do you agree that these proposed changes will make multi-agency arrangements more accountable and transparent?

N/A

19. Is there anything else you want to comment on in Multi-agency safeguarding arrangements?

We welcome the plans to strengthen the role of education set out in the new draft guidance. We agree that this has the potential to improve outcomes for children and families by bringing about a greater level of collaboration between local safeguarding partners and education providers and practitioners.

However, for children with the most complex needs and experiences, including children in care, we feel it necessary to stress that the roles of many agencies besides education must be strengthened if the necessary level of multi-agency collaboration for effective local safeguarding arrangements is to be secured. We therefore particularly welcome the guidance aimed at strengthening the role of VCSE organisations, although we feel that, for some children, including many with care experience, this may not go far enough.

The insights offered by education providers are likely to provide a smaller proportion of the full picture for a care-experienced child than they might for a child without care-experience, for two reasons.

Firstly, the duration of the contact that any given education provider or professional may have with any given care-experienced child is, statistically, lower than for other children. This is due to the higher-than-average number of term-time school moves experienced by children in care, as well as the lower rates of attendance at education provision for children in care.

Secondly, as our staff have told us, it is often difficult for education professionals and providers to develop a proper understanding of the full extent of the effects of the trauma and other adverse experiences that so many children experience before and during their time in the care system. One member of our team, who has experience as a foster carer of school-aged children, told us that even teachers they otherwise regarded highly would frequently fail to understand the basic effects of their foster child's past trauma and adverse experiences on the child's behaviours and attachment. This was echoed by a young person we spoke to, who felt poorly understood and at times "disregarded" in education, particularly when it came to the question of additional support.

Ultimately, when multi-agency safeguarding becomes necessary, it is imperative to have a sufficiently broad and nuanced understanding of children's needs and experiences. When those needs and experiences are complex, as is the case for many children in care, the perspectives of education providers and the local safeguarding partners may not be sufficient.

Accordingly, we welcome the draft guidance aimed at strengthening the role of VCSE organisations. Whilst we agree that VCSEs may provide valuable insights because many provide education and activities for children, we feel this view of VCSEs' potential contribution is too narrow. In many cases, VCSEs will also be able to offer expert insights into the broader needs and experiences of particular groups of children. Many, such as Become, provide advice and support services to children, as well as engaging with children to understand their experiences, views and wishes on a range of issues. Such organisations may be able to provide insights into the unique needs and experiences of particular groups of vulnerable children that no other party can provide.

In its present form, we feel that the guidance reflects neither the breadth of organisations falling under the VCSE umbrella, nor the full diversity of the valuable insights these organisations may provide. We are concerned that, as a result, the guidance will not be as effective as it could be in supporting local safeguarding partners to identify and draw upon valuable organisational perspectives.

We recommend, therefore, that the draft guidance be amended to better convey the potential contribution of this diverse sector. In turn, we would also welcome amendments to the guidance to the effect that local safeguarding partners should consider naming VCSEs as relevant agencies in order to make use of the unique, expert insights they are able to provide in relation to particular groups of children.

20. To what extent do you agree that these changes will strengthen whole family working and tailored support for children and families ahead of wider system reforms?

N/A

21. Do you agree that the features outlined for Family Group Conferences will improve family network engagement in decision making and supporting children?

N/A

22. Do you agree that the proposed changes will help to improve the outcomes of children and their families who receive support under section 17 of the Children Act 1989?

N/A

23. Do the proposed provisions for the role of the social work qualified practice supervisor or manager ensure appropriate social work oversight?

N/A

24. In your opinion, are there practitioners who should not be lead practitioners? If yes, why?

N/A

25. Do you agree with the proposed changes to strengthen assessment and support for disabled children?

Yes

26. Does the new information clarify the role of children's social care in the assessment of suitability and social work input for a mother and baby unit placement?

N/A

27. To what extent do you agree these changes will give practitioners across all agencies and organisations a clearer understanding of the work HMPPS do and the contribution HMPPS makes to keeping children safe?

N/A

28. Is there anything else you want to comment on in Help and support for children and families?

We are supportive of many aspects of the section of the draft guidance aimed at strengthening assessment and support for disabled children. However, we feel that, in its present form, there is a risk that the guidance will not be equitably applied in practice to all children, especially children in care living in residential children's homes and other settings.

One young person we spoke to shared their experiences of stigma, and of feeling blamed by professionals for their own support needs. It is imperative that a non-stigmatising approach forms the cornerstone of assessment and support for all children, and we particularly welcome this aspect of the draft guidance in relation to disabled children. As the same young person chose to highlight, it is crucial that this includes in practice the many mental health conditions that constitute disabilities when experienced chronically and over the long-term.

We are wholly supportive of the systemic approach set out in the draft guidance, whereby assessment and support is conducted in such a way that securing the best outcomes for the child is held as paramount, without losing sight of the central importance of the pressures on, and needs of, the whole family. It is our understanding that systemic approaches of this sort are already regarded as best practice across much of social work, and that they are robustly supported by evidence of their effectiveness. We welcome the elevation of this best practice to statutory guidance.

Notwithstanding our support for this approach, we are concerned that, in its present form, the guidance may in practice fail to be applied to children in care who live in residential children's homes and a number of other settings. The draft guidance presently refers exclusively to "families" and fails to outline the approach that should be taken to the assessment and support of disabled children living in children's homes, secure settings, semi-independent placements, and other settings where children live outside of what might be described as a family unit. These children are as much in need of effective, non-stigmatising and high-quality assessment and support, if not more so. We recommend that amendments or additions be made to the guidance to clarify the approach that should be taken in these instances.

29. To what extent do you agree these standards will be effective in supporting improved multi-agency child protection work?

N/A

30. To what extent do you agree that the proposed changes make clear that the multi-agency safeguarding response applies when harm, or risk of harm, comes from outside the home, including online?

N/A

31. To what extent do you agree that the updated section 'supporting children at risk of or experiencing harm outside the home' makes clear what practitioners need to consider in supporting this group of children?

N/A

32. Is there anything else you want to comment on in Decisive multi-agency child protection?

N/A

33. Will it be feasible for your local authority to submit notifications for the deaths of care leavers aged 18-25?

N/A

34. Is there anything else you want to comment on in Learning from serious child safeguarding incidents?

N/A

35. Do you have any overall comments about the potential impact, whether positive or negative, of our proposed changes on those who share protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010?

N/A

Contact

For further information, please contact Mark Paul.

Mark Paul
Evidence and Impact Officer

E-mail: Mark.Paul@becomecharity.org.uk