appg

for Care-Experienced
Children and Young People

BECOME IN CARE. LEAVING CARE. WE CARE.

All-Party Parliamentary Group for Care-Experienced Children and Young People Inquiry Report:

How Does the Care System Protect and Support Children's Relationships?

October 2026

This report has been researched and funded by Become, which provides the secretariat to the APPG. Become is the national charity for children in care and young care leavers.

This is not an official publication of the House of Commons or the House of Lords. It has not been approved by either House or its committees. All-Party Parliamentary Groups are informal groups of Members of both Houses with a common interest in particular issues. The views expressed in this report are those of the group.

Contents

Executive summary 03

Introduction 08

Part 1: Relationships matter 09

a) The power of enduring relationships 11

b) What children need from their relationships 14

c) Measuring enduring relationships 16

Part 2: Instability breaks relationships 17

a) How instability disrupts relationships 17

b) Building a more stable care system 22

Part 3: Practice can protect and help build relationships 32

a) Prioritising children's relationships 32

b) Equipping the workforce 37

c) Protecting children's relationships 40

d) Supporting children to build enduring relationships 42

Conclusion and full recommendations 45

Methodology 48

Acknowledgements 51

Executive summary

Relationships are at the heart of children's lives

Every child needs relationships where they feel known, valued and safe. For children in care these relationships can be a vital source of stability, belonging and support. They help children understand who they are, make sense of difficult experiences, build confidence and feel connected to the people and communities that matter to them.

About the inquiry

The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Care-Experienced Children and Young People launched this inquiry to examine how the care system protects and supports the relationships that matter to children. We wanted to understand the impact of instability on children's relationships, what changes are needed to reduce disruption, and how the system can better support children to build and maintain important connections.

The inquiry took place between April and June 2026, alongside significant developments in children's social care policy, including the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act, the Government's Enduring Relationships strategy, the National Fostering Strategy and wider reforms to children's social care.

We gathered evidence through workshops with care-experienced children and young people, sessions with organisations and professionals working across the care system, an online evidence survey, and submissions from Children in Care Councils and other groups. In total, we heard from 226 organisations and individuals, including 171 care-experienced young people.

This executive summary sets out what we heard, the key issues identified through the inquiry and the recommendations of the APPG. The full report provides further detail on the evidence and the experiences shared with us.

What children told us

Throughout our inquiry, children and young people told us about the many relationships that are important to them. These include parents and siblings, wider family, friends, foster siblings, carers, teachers, social workers, health professionals and other trusted adults. They also include relationships with their communities, faith groups, clubs and activities.

Together, these connections form a network around a child. When they are strong and consistent, they can provide security through periods of change and uncertainty.

As one care-experienced young person told us:

> **"I think they matter most because without them, we question our sense of identity [...] I don't know who I am without these people in my life."**

For children in care, relationships are not an optional extra. They are a fundamental part of their wellbeing, identity, safety, psychological development and overall ability to thrive.

Children also told us that they want a say in who matters to them and how those relationships are maintained. They want adults who listen, understand their experiences and identity, and support them to build relationships on their own terms. They should be able to set boundaries and step away from relationships that are unsafe or harmful, while being supported to build healthy ones.

For some children, being understood is particularly important. Children from minoritised, religious and LGBTQ+ backgrounds told us about experiences of racism, discrimination and isolation, as well as gaps in support for their language, culture, faith and identity. Children with disabilities told us about adults not always understanding or believing their needs. Children should be able to feel that they can be themselves and that the adults around them understand what matters to them.

Instability is breaking important relationships

However, too many children in care experience a system that makes relationships harder to build and maintain.

Throughout our inquiry, we heard about children being moved between homes, schools and communities; separated from siblings; placed far from home; and experiencing repeated changes in social workers, carers and other professionals. These changes can happen with little notice and are often outside children's control. The scale of this instability is significant. In 2025, 10% of children in care experienced three or more moves in the previous year.

Each move can mean losing much more than a home. Children can lose friends, teachers, carers, neighbours, clubs, communities and professionals who know them and understand their needs. They may lose contact with siblings and wider family, or find it harder to maintain relationships because of distance and practical barriers. Moving away can also mean losing access to familiar places, cultural and faith communities, and the everyday connections that help children feel that they belong.

One young person described the experience of moving school:

> **"I sort of feel lonely when I move school. I moved school 6 times [...] Each time I moved, [my social worker] said, 'you need to start off fresh'. And I was like, no, because I wanted to contact my old friends."**

For children with special educational needs and disabilities, the impact of a move can be even greater. They may lose trusted teachers, specialist staff or professionals who understand their communication and support needs. A move can also disrupt education, health care and access to specialist services, meaning children may have to build new relationships with professionals repeatedly and explain their circumstances and needs.

Sudden moves can be particularly disruptive and anxiety-inducing, leaving children with little time to understand what is happening or say goodbye. A care-experienced young person told us:

> **"I was moved on the last day of school. Nobody knew where I was or that anything had happened because it was an emergency move so I fell off the face of the earth and no one knew."**

Repeated disruption does more than break individual relationships. It can change how children experience relationships altogether. When children repeatedly lose people they care about, they can become less confident that relationships will last. Some told us that instability had affected their ability to trust others and form new relationships.

The system is struggling to provide the right homes in the right places

Some of this instability is driven by wider pressures across children's social care.

Local authorities have a legal duty to secure sufficient accommodation for children in their care and to keep them living close to home, where reasonably practicable. Yet there are significant gaps in the availability of suitable homes and carers, particularly for children with complex needs or specialist health and support needs.

A shortage of foster carers can mean children who could be supported in family-based foster homes are instead moved into residential provision. Children's homes are also not always available where they're needed. The result can be children being moved far from home, into settings that do not meet their needs, or into unregistered accommodation.

These pressures don't sit within children's social care alone. We heard from the sector about the increasing pressure placed on the care system when children with complex mental health needs or significant risks do not have access to the right provision elsewhere, including children who might previously have been supported through CAMHS or youth justice provision. When responsibilities sit between systems, children can end up experiencing further instability rather than receiving the right support.

A more stable care system therefore needs more than additional accommodation. It needs the right homes, in the right places, with carers and staff who have the skills to meet children's needs and protect their relationships.

Relationships must become a core part of care

Our inquiry also heard that change is possible. Across England, there are examples of practice that go beyond simply enabling contact and actively help children build, protect and strengthen the relationships that matter to them.

We also welcome the Government's commitment to developing an enduring relationships measure and its recognition that children in care need relationships that can provide stability, belonging and support over time.

This is an important step towards putting relationships at the heart of care. But the measure must sit within a wider shift in how the care system understands and supports relationships. Children should

not only be asked who is important to them; the system must take responsibility for helping them maintain and strengthen those relationships.

Children should be supported from the start of their time in care to identify the people, communities and connections that matter to them. Their views should shape care planning, with clear plans for protecting important relationships and responsibility for making this happen. When change is unavoidable, children should have time to prepare, understand what is happening and say goodbye.

Children should also have opportunities to build new relationships beyond the professionals involved in their care. Independent Visitors, mentors, befriending services and community activities can provide friendship, belonging and support.

The adults around children need the skills and confidence to support this, including understanding the impact of trauma, loss and instability on relationships, and the importance of children's culture, religion, identity, disability and communication needs. Safeguarding should also work alongside relational practice, with risk assessed proportionately so that children are not unnecessarily prevented from building friendships or maintaining important relationships.

The Government's enduring relationships agenda is an important opportunity to make relationships a meaningful part of good care. The new measure of 'enduring relationships' should reflect what children say makes a relationship meaningful, focusing on quality and experience, not simply numbers.

Every child in care should have the support and opportunities to build and maintain the relationships that matter to them.

> **"I found it amazing to have a good relationship with the people around me. I really appreciate the way that they treated me, showing me how to do this, to stay away from this, how to make sure I'm safe enough. I'm really happy with being related with them."**
>
> - Care-experienced young person

Our recommendations

1. **Ensure children can grow up with the relationships that matter to them.**
    - Boost sufficiency through a sustained national foster care recruitment campaign and sustainable capital investment for local authorities to develop or expand children's homes to meet local needs.
    - Ensure new provision is developed where it is needed through a stronger Ofsted registration and triagee process.
    - Improve matching through a national register of foster carers.
    - Strengthen accountability for how sufficiency is planned and delivered, and its impact on children's relationships through:
        - Ofsted inspections of local authority children's services.
        - New accountability measures for Regional Care Cooperatives.
        - Better data on where gaps in sufficiency are preventing children from living in homes that meet their needs and support their relationships.
        - A review of the sufficiency duty.
2. **Put children's relationships at the heart of care planning.**
    - Ensure care plans identify and protect important relationships with children meaningfully involved in decisions that affect them.
    - Plan and support change carefully, ensuring children understand what is happening and have appropriate emotional support.
    - Ensure risk-averse practice does not unnecessarily restrict or harm children's relationships.
3. **Make relationships part of everyday practice.**
    - Strengthen professional standards, training and qualifications for children's social care professionals and foster carers, so that supporting relationships is a core part of practice.
    - Build on the Governments enduring relationship agenda, including through a measure that reflects how well the care system supports the relationships that matter most to children.
4. **Protect relationships when children experience change**
    - Support effective family reunification, through dedicated funding and stronger guidance for local authorities.
    - Make contact more child-centred and flexible, with arrangements designed around natural connection.
    - Give children access to age-appropriate phones, devices, and digital connectivity, with appropriate support to help them maintain relationships
    - Provide flexible funding to overcome practical barriers, such as transport costs.
5. **Help children build healthy relationships and wider networks**
    - Strengthening access to Independent Visitors, mentors, befriending and family finding services where these can support children's relationships.
    - Help children build new social networks when they move, by connecting them with communities, groups and activities that reflect their identity and interests.
    - Ensure every child in care has age-appropriate support to understand healthy relationships and recognise unsafe or harmful dynamics.
    - Improve access to therapeutic support for children who have experienced significant relational disruption.

Introduction

Every child needs strong, trusting, and loving relationships to feel safe, develop their identity and thrive. For children in care, these relationships can be particularly important. Many will have experienced trauma, loss or disruption before entering care, making stability and continuity in the relationships around them all the more significant.

We welcome the Government's ambition to put enduring relationships at the heart of the care system. Recent developments, including the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act, the Enduring Relationships agenda, the National Fostering Strategy and reforms to children's social care, represent important changes to the system in which children in care live and grow up.

Against this backdrop, the APPG for Care-Experienced Children and Young People launched an inquiry into how the care system protects and supports the relationships that matter to children. We wanted to understand what's working, where children continue to experience instability and separation, and what more can be done to help them build and maintain important relationships with family, siblings, friends, professionals and their wider communities.

We heard directly from care-experienced children and young people, alongside organisations and professionals working across the care system. Between April and June 2026, more than 250 individuals and organisations contributed evidence, including over 170 care-experienced young people.

This report brings together what we heard. It sets out the experiences and priorities shared with us, considers the implications for the care system, and makes recommendations for how policy and practice can better support children to have the stable, meaningful and enduring relationships they need to thrive.

We are grateful to Become, the APPG's secretariat, for conducting the inquiry on our behalf and for bringing together the evidence and producing this report. We are particularly grateful to all the care-experienced children and young people, organisations and individuals, who shared their experience and expertise with us.





Jess Asato MP and Darren Paffey MP

Joint Chairs of the APPG for Care-Experienced Children and Young People

Part 1: Relationships matter

Children in care rely on a wide network of relationships

When we talk about relationships, we mean the connections that matter to a child – including family members, friends and trusted adults. These are the relationships children value and want to maintain.

The people who matter to a child will naturally change and evolve as they grow up. There is no single model of meaningful relationships or fixed list of people who should matter. Children must be supported to identify the people who are important to them and, where it is safe and wanted, to maintain those connections. This enables children to build their relationship network in their own way and time. Care-experienced children and young people told us that this is needed to fully explore all parts of their identity.

Through our inquiry, children and young people described the wide range of relationships that matter to them. Below highlights those most frequently mentioned and what care-experienced children and young people told us about them.

Siblings	Including foster siblings, half siblings, and step siblings - were by far the most frequently referenced relationship. Staying in touch with siblings can be one of children's biggest concerns when entering care, and many told us they lost vital years of connection that could never be retrieved. Siblings provide a unique mutual support and understanding about shared experiences in childhood as well as providing support, continuity, love, and friendship. The importance of these relationships cannot be understated. **"I couldn't have asked for a better brother, really. Like, even though he and I have got all our troubles. We're us, we've got that bond."**
Friends	Friends can be an irreplaceable source of connection, stability and support and can be just as important as family relationships, particularly for LGBTQ+ children seeking acceptance and belonging. We heard how instability in care was disrupting friendships and leaving children isolated. **"My friends don't care about my background; they love me for who I am."**
Extended family	Family relationships extend beyond parents and siblings to include aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins, stepfamily and even pets. These relationships can be important connections to a child's identity or cultural background and can be sources of love, support, and belonging. **"I ran away to my Aunties when I was 10 so they could see how much she meant to me."**
Carers	Carers, including foster carers, key workers , and residential workers can be an essential part of a child's experience of care. Relationships with carers who know and understand a child can be deeply important. Yet through our inquiry we heard that the system doesn't always support these relationships to continue when circumstances change. **"Even though I didn't tell my foster carer at the time about losing my friends over that [coming out]. She was very supportive of me being queer and even though she couldn't relate she would still always be there to give relationship advice."**

Professionals	Trusted professionals - including social workers, teachers, SEN support staff, health professionals, therapists, Independent Reviewing Officers and others - can play an important practical and emotional role. For some children, a professional may be one of the only consistent adult relationships in their life. When professionals leave or when a child moves, that connection can disappear. **"I think my social worker is really good at promoting my relationship with my sister, and saying, they need connection every weekend."**
Other care-experienced children	Children meet other care-experienced children through shared living arrangements, children in care councils, participation work and peer networks. These relationships can help reduce isolation by giving children a space where they feel understood by people with shared experiences. **"Only recently since, you know, doing work with Become and other sort of care-experience groups have now been okay with sharing experiences that I've been through."**
Community groups	Religious, cultural, disability, LGBTQ+, hobby, youth and sports groups help children build relationships, explore their interests and develop their identity. Care-experienced children and young people told us that maintaining cultural, linguistic, faith and community connections can be essential to their wellbeing and sense of self. **"In my local authority I was able to join drama group and some activities groups like football groups, I've connected with a lot of people through this which has made me really really happy. I really like to have like good relations with the community and to be supported to make something happen."**
Romantic partners	R omantic relationships are a normal part of growing up and can bring positive support as well as risks. Frequent moves make romantic relationships difficult to establish, while instability can sometimes lead children to become dependent on relationships too quickly. Children need support to navigate romantic relationships in a safe and healthy way. **"Children in care often don't have models of happy relationships and therefore repeat toxic patterns or feel that they are starting right from the beginning with no model unaware of what a healthy relationship looks like. I feel that the care system has most affected my ability to form romantic relationships."**

There is no single relationship that is universally more important than another. Together, these connections can help children in care feel safe, valued, and understood. A sibling can provide a sense of family, a friend can offer everyday support, and a trusted adult can provide consistency through periods of change. Each can help children navigate challenges, maintain their identity, and feel connected.

"I would like to stay in touch with the children of my foster carer when I leave, because they are my friends and they also make me happy and we have lots of fun."

- Care-experienced child

The power of enduring relationships

Strong connections protect mental health, provide stability and help build identity

Strong, stable relationships can change children's lives for the better. They can support mental and physical health, strengthen identity and belonging, and provide safety and stability during some of the most challenging periods of childhood.

For children in care, these relationships can be especially important for emotional wellbeing. Friends, foster siblings, and carers can provide support and companionship during periods of change.

> **"My CAMHS psychiatrist, he was incredible. When I got moved out of area, he agreed to keep me on and he was doing weekly phone calls with me and then I'd have a face-to-face appointment monthly and he'd always do it on a Friday or Monday so then I could stay with my mum for the weekend and then go back to placement, he was amazing."**
>
> – Care-experienced young person

Professionals such as social workers, therapists, and support staff can also provide important mental health support, particularly when other parts of a child's life are changing.

> **"For me I was lucky enough to join Scouts when my disability wasn't terrible, but it was getting a little bit worse, and they were so supportive [...] And I felt like I learned so much about how to deal with my disability from that club. It let me express myself in the way that I should be able to express myself."**
>
> – Care-experienced young person

Relationships provide continuity in children's physical health too. Having consistent relationships with doctors, health professionals, and carers can help ensure children receive the ongoing care they need. For some children with disabilities, having someone who understands their needs can be critically important to their safety and wellbeing. One young person described how their sibling stayed by their side during a seizure in foster care and spoke up to ensure they received the right medical support.

Relationships also help children discover who they are. Social groups or communities can give children a space outside the care system to make friends, explore their identity, culture, and interests, and develop a strong sense of belonging.

These spaces can be particularly important for disabled and LGBTQ+ children, and children from minoritised ethnic or religious communities. They can offer opportunities to practice faith, connect with peers who share their experiences, and simply be themselves. They can also help children maintain connections with their wider community and develop an identity beyond their experience of care.

"They were very much in my corner [...] because these friends would have sent messages by carrier pigeon, if that's what it took, they were the only real people that were in my corner, understood what I actually needed from them to be able to get me to communicate."

– Care-experienced young person

These examples show the difference that access to understanding and accepting communities can make. We also heard about the impact when those connections are not available. Supporting children to access the people and communities that matter to them can strengthen confidence, belonging and their sense of self.

Relationships also provide safety and security. They are the people children can call on when they have a bad day, need help, or when something goes wrong. Trusted relationships can provide a crucial safety net, and in some circumstances, help protect children from harm and exploitation.

When these connections are nurtured and sustained, they can be transformative. When they are disrupted or lost, the consequences can be profound. Every child in care should have genuine opportunities to build community and feel secure in their cultural, religious and personal identity.

The lifelong impact of enduring relationships

Positive relationships are associated with better outcomes over the long term. Having even one strong, trusting relationship can transform a child's life. It can support resilience, improve educational and economic outcomes and make family reunification more likely to succeed[1].

Safe relationships give children the foundations they need to build healthy relationships of their own. They provide encouragement, security and confidence as children navigate school, friendships and family life.

For children who experience repeated moves and changes, this stability can be much harder to find Constant instability can leave children feeling isolated at important moments in their lives.

For children placed on Deprivation of Liberty (DoL) orders, or living in unregistered accommodation, isolation can be particularly severe.

"I was placed on a DOLs order so I wasn't able to have a phone to keep in contact with anyone. I had to wait for any form of contact to be planned behind the scenes and it was only with people the local authority agreed on between themselves."

- Care-experienced young person

1 Jones and LaLiberte (2016), *Risk and Protective Factors of Foster Care Reentry*

We heard that too many children in care are having to overcome barriers to maintain the friendships and relationships that matter to them. This should not depend on a child having the resources, confidence or persistence to manage those barriers alone.

Relationships also help children navigate education. Teachers and other school staff can become important sources of continuity, encouragement, and advocacy. When children move schools and lose those relationships, the effects can extend beyond education.

> **"My PE teacher took me aside, and said, 'yeah, I really support you' and she actually went home and educated herself on how to help me, and that was really, nice, and on my last day there, I came back in, and she hugged me, and we both cried, because she was the nicest person."**
>
> - Care-experienced young person

Relationships become even more important as children move towards adulthood. At 16 and 17, children in care are often expected to begin living more independently. At the same time, they are preparing for the transition out of care, when there is a sharp reduction in formal support at 18. Too many children reach this point without the trusted adults and wider networks they need. Research has shown that one in five children in care, most commonly those living in supported accommodation, did not have a trusted adult in their life[2].

Young people need reliable people around them as they make important decisions about education, employment, housing, and their future. The absence of these relationships can have consequences well beyond childhood. Loneliness in childhood is associated with poorer physical health, mental wellbeing, and educational outcomes, and care leavers also report higher rates of loneliness than the non-leaving care population[3].

The relationships children build during care can also shape how they approach relationships in adulthood. Consistent, trusted connections can help children understand what healthy relationships look like and give them confidence to build and sustain relationships of their own. Without these foundations, many care-experienced adults can spend years trying to repair relationships through therapy or building from scratch the lasting, loving relationships they did not have during their time in care.

> **"Because what we've got to remember as well, their children and things that happen in their childhood is going to affect their adulthood. It's going to affect their educational attainment. It's going to affect their ability to have relationships, professional, personal or otherwise"**
>
> - Care-experienced young person

The transition to adulthood should build on the relationships children have developed throughout their care journey, rather than treating independence as separation from support. The care system's sustained focus on preparing children for independence - to be able to live alone and look after

2 Coram Voice (2025), *From Surviving to Thriving: The seven drivers of well-being for children in care and care leavers; Jones and LaLiberte (2016) Risk and Protective Factors of Foster Care Reentry*
3 Coram Voice (2025), *From Surviving to Thriving: The seven drivers of well-being for children in care and care leavers*

themselves – undermines the drive to put enduring relationships at the heart of the care system. The care system must be designed to ensure that every child in care is supported to keep, rebuild, and nurture the relationships that matter most to them.

What children need from their relationships

Choice and control over the relationships that matter to them

Children in care need to have a say over the relationships that matter most in their lives. This is not only important to their wellbeing, it is also a right. Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises every child's right to express their views on matters that affect them and to have those views taken seriously[4].

Having a say in who is part of their life can help children develop confidence in their own identity and understand that their feelings and needs matter. It also gives children the opportunity to build relationships on their own terms, rather than having their important relationships defined by the care system.

> **"I love my extended family to bits. I don't speak to my parents personally, but my extended family, they have my heart."**
>
> – Care-experienced young person

This includes having the confidence to set boundaries, and where necessary, step back from relationships that are harmful or unwanted. Learning that they can say no, ask for help and choose who they trust are important skills that children carry into adulthood.

For children in care, this can also mean having the freedom to build relationships beyond the people and professionals involved in their care. Family members, friends, neighbours, community groups and other trusted adults can all play an important part in helping children understand who they are and where they belong.

Choice does not mean that children have to navigate relationships alone. They need adults around them who will listen, help them understand their options and support them when a relationship becomes difficult or unsafe. The starting point should be that children have a voice in deciding who matters to them and what those relationships mean to them.

> **"Maybe the social worker could [...] say, 'I know it's your birthday coming up, who are the most important people that you'd like to celebrate it with?' That way the child can have a voice."**
>
> – Care-experienced young person

When children have choice and control over their relationships, they are better able to understand

4 United Nations (1989), *Convention on the Rights of the Child: Article 12*

themselves, express what they need and build relationships on their own terms.

What makes a good relationship

For children in care, the best relationships are built on consistency, honesty, and mutual respect. They provide a safe space where children can be themselves.

Because the care system can involve frequent change, having at least one stable relationship to rely on can make a significant difference, and provide continuity when other parts of a child's life are changing.

Children also value relationships in which they are known and respected for who they are. This can be particularly important for children from minoritised, religious, and LGBTQ+ backgrounds, for whom care can be particularly isolating when the people around them don't understand or recognise their identity and communities.

We heard accounts of racism, discrimination and bullying, as well as children not having consistent access to aspects of their identity, including their language, cultural food and religious practices, including diet, prayer and holidays. Some children also told us that their concerns were not always heard or taken seriously when they asked for help.

> **"And I remember there was this time, I had this support worker that I just met, I was moving into the home and I was saying to her, 'Oh yeah, I don't like to be called Chinese, I like to be called Cantonese'. And she just very quickly respected me and it meant so much to me because I never have someone who actually like just agrees on my point like this is what I think I am and that that really like that just made my day."**
>
> - Care-experienced child

Being understood and accepted by the people around them can help children feel secure in who they are and confident they don't have to hide or change important parts of themselves to belong.

Children also need people who will listen when things are difficult. They don't need that person to have all the answers. They need someone who will take them seriously, hear what they are saying, and stay alongside them. Having someone who listens can also mean having someone who will act. Children need adults who will stand alongside them, understand what matters to them and help them pursue their goals.

For many children, being in care shapes how other people see them. Assumptions and judgement can make it harder to form friendships, trust new people, or talk openly about their experiences.

Care-experienced children and young people told us they want relationships where they can be open about being in care without fear of being treated differently. They want to be seen as whole people rather than defined by their care experience.

For some children, sharing about their care experience can lead to being isolated at school, rejected by extended family and friends, or finding that the parents of friends are reluctant to include them. For children from minoritised ethnic or religious communities, these experiences can be compounded by

distrust of the care system or misunderstanding about why a child is in care.

> **"My friends' parents don't respond to my new foster carer when she tries to arrange for me to have meet ups with them."**
>
> – Care-experienced child

Stigma can create barriers to belonging at school, in communities and in wider social networks, and make it harder for children to feel they belong and to build the relationships they need. Children should be able to talk openly about their experiences of care without fear of judgement or being treated differently.

Measuring enduring relationships

The Government has recognised the importance of lifelong relationships through its Enduring Relationships agenda and is aiming to put relationships at the heart of the care system[5]. Meaningful change requires a broad shift in how the care system values, supports and prioritises relationships throughout a child's life.

Care-experienced children and young people must be involved in shaping this work. This is particularly important as the government develops a new metric to measure enduring relationships.

The metric should:

- Be co-designed with care-experienced children and young people, reflecting their own definitions of the relationships that matter to them and how those relationships make them feel, including whether they feel safe, cared for, supported and able to be themselves.
- Recognise the range and changing nature of children's relationships, including family, friends, trusted adults and wider communities. It should recognise that relationships can develop, change or end over time and should not assume that every relationship needs to be maintained.
- Measure quality and experience, not simply quantity or contact. It should explore whether relationships are meaningful and supportive, understand why relationships deteriorate or end and whether a child's experience of care contributed, and support honest conversations about what children need as relationships change.
- Reflect the diversity of children in care and use accessible measures, including the distinct experiences of disabled, LGBTQ+ and minoritised children. Measures should use child-friendly, age-appropriate language and appropriate validated measures of wellbeing, avoiding clinical or inaccessible terminology.

Policy-makers must move beyond acknowledging that relationships matter and focus on fixing the system so that every child in care can build and maintain the lasting connections that matter to them.

Recommendation

The Government's new metric on enduring relationships should be co-designed with children in care and care-experienced young people, reflect the changing nature and variety of children's important relationships, and measure how the children themselves experience and value the quality and significance of those relationships.

5 Department for Education (2026), *Enduring Relationships for care-experienced children*

Part 2: Instability breaks relationships

The care system is designed to keep children safe and to promote their wellbeing. Yet throughout our inquiry, we heard that too many children in care continue to experience high levels of instability: frequent changes, uncertainty and disruption that make it harder for them to feel safe, settled and connected.

This instability breaks and strains important relationships. Children are separated from siblings, lose friends and trusted adults, move schools and communities, or find themselves living far away from the people and places they love.

> **"I think that it's like somebody flipped a switch and your life changed forever in an instant. And it was like, oh no, you're living with your brother, but now you're not."**
>
> – Care-experienced young person

We heard many examples of children being forced to change where they lived, who they saw, and how they were able to connect with people. These changes are often made beyond their control and with little notice.

> **"And every time we move them, it's not an address change. They lose friends, family, siblings, schools, youth clubs, the corner shop, the woman across the road who has known them for eight years that always said hello to him, the only person that said hello to him."**
>
> – Mark Owers, National Association of Fostering Providers (Sector evidence session on fostering sufficiency)

How instability disrupts relationships

Moving home

Moving home requires children to adapt to new people, routines, living spaces, environments and communities. It can also mean losing the everyday relationships that make life feel familiar and safe.

Children may be moved because the relationship breaks down where they're living, their needs change, their care plan changes or an emergency move is required. Whatever the reason, the impact can be profound. In 2025, 10% of children in care in England had experienced three or more moves in the

previous year[6].

> **"Moving a lot led to me just not trusting any one at all. I moved a total of 46 times and not once was I asked if there was anything they could do to help me not break placements down, when I was moved for no reason I just stopped trusting anyone, my longest placement was 13 months."**
>
> – Care-experienced young person

Children are often unable to maintain relationships with former carers, professionals or other children they may have lived with in foster care, children's homes or other settings. Even where the relationship was positive and they want it to continue.

Separated from siblings

For many children, siblings are their most important and enduring relationships. They may be the people who have shared every stage of their childhood and who understand experiences that no one else can.

Yet entering care or moving to a new care setting, can mean siblings are separated. Sometimes this is necessary to keep children safe or because siblings have different needs. However, too often, it happens because there aren't enough suitable homes that can keep them together.

Research by the Children's Commissioner's Office in 2023 estimated that 37% of children in care were separated from siblings during their initial placement in care, rising to 78% for children in children's homes and 93% for those in supported accommodation[7].

> **"I felt like they were the only ones that properly understood me and what happened and for them to get taken from me really affected me."**
>
> – Care-experienced young person

Older siblings can often take on a caring or protective role for younger siblings. While children should never be expected to take responsibility for caring for siblings, separation can feel particularly distressing where siblings have relied on each other.

Moving schools

School is more than a place to learn. For many children it's where they build friendships, develop trusted relationships and find a sense of belonging. It can also provide a safe and protective

6 The data relates to children in care on 31st March 2025. See Department for Education (2025), *Children Looked After in England, including Adoptions: Reporting year 2025*
7 Children's Commissioner for England (2023), *Siblings in Care.*

environment outside of the care system. Yet children in care can be forced to change school or college, often because they've moved home. Previous research from Become showed that, in 2023/24, more than 5,000 children in care moved schools during their GCSE or A-Level years, with 17% of children in years 10 or 11 moving school at least once[8].

Moving schools means losing friends, teachers, support networks and familiar communities, at exactly the point when children need stability most. This can be particularly difficult for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) who may lose trusted staff and specialist support. Where SEND needs have not yet been identified or properly supported, a school move may also disrupt relationships that help children to understand and meet those needs.

It is harder to form new relationships when moving into an established school community. Stigma and a lack of understanding about care experience can make this harder still.

The consequences extend far beyond school. One young person told us they had to give up their place at Oxford because they needed to focus on everything else happening with their life:

> **"Sixth form is when all of my relationships fell apart because of issues in care. I ended up moving an hour away, losing contact with all of my friends and the teachers. I ended up having to reject my place at Oxford to focus on fixing everything else going on, which I think is one of my biggest regrets. Moving during sixth form has had a knock on impact with the rest of my life."**

Distance moves

In 2025, more than a fifth of all children in care, and almost half of all children living in children's homes or secure homes were living more than 20 miles away from home[9]. For some children, this means living hundreds of miles away from their families, friends and support networks.

Distance makes relationships harder to maintain. Long journeys can make visits difficult and more expensive, preventing children from seeing the people they care about. It can also make it harder for their social worker to visit them regularly, which may reduce the support they receive.

Research from Ofsted found that in 2025, the average travel time between where a child was living and their home before entering care was more than an hour in every region, except the North-West: in the South-West the average was 157 minutes[10].

Living far from home may also disrupt children's relationships with the health professionals who know them and understand their needs. Moving to a new area can mean changing GP practices, hospitals and other services, while children may face delays in accessing care or be placed back on waiting needs. For children with ongoing health needs, these changes can mean losing continuity with professionals they trust and having to repeatedly explain their circumstances and needs to new people.

8 Become (2025), *Moved During Exams: The Instability Crisis affecting Children in Care*
9 On 31st March 2025, 22% of all children in care in England, and 47% of all children living in children's homes or secure units were more than 20 miles from home. See Department for Education (2025), *Children Looked After in England, including Adoptions: Reporting year 2025*
10 Ofsted (2026), Understanding children's social care sufficiency in England

> **"Same with the therapist point: I moved out of area so had to be taken off her list and when I came back I had to go back in the two year waitlist to see her again."**
>
> – Care-experienced young person

Children can also be moved into areas or communities that don't reflect their identity, culture, heritage, religious beliefs or accent. This can happen through poor planning and a shortage of appropriate local homes or carers, particularly when children have complex or specialist needs.

Being separated from cultural and community connections can affect children's wellbeing, identity and sense of belonging. We heard about children losing access to familiar foods, language, hair care, faith practices and cultural traditions, as well as experiences of racism and discrimination.

> **"But I was moved into, again, a predominantly white area. On my way walking from home on the bus, there was literally graffiti on the wall, which I cannot say out loud, but it was a slur against Pakistani people, and it was, you know, the fact of seeing that every time I was walking past, and then I was also racially abused on the bus as well."**
>
> – Care-experienced young person

Emergency and last-minute moves

When moves or changes happen abruptly, or with little or no notice, they can be particularly disruptive and anxiety-inducing for children. Children may have little time to understand what's happening and prepare for the change or say goodbye to the people who matter to them.

> **"I was moved on the last day of school. Nobody knew where I was or that anything had happened because it was an emergency move so I fell off the face of the earth and no one knew."**
>
> – Care-experienced young person

Children can suddenly lose access to people who were central to their lives only yesterday. They may have no way to contact friends, teachers, former carers or professionals, and little opportunity to understand what has happened. For children with disabilities, sudden change can be particularly distressing. Changes to familiar people, routines and environments can cause significant anxiety, while moves can also disrupt practical support. Children may have to adjust to new settings, new ways of communicating with adults supporting them, often without enough time to prepare. This makes an already difficult transition even harder.

Care settings that don't support relationships

We also heard concerns about growing numbers of children being moved into settings that are unable to meet their needs or support their relationships.

The rapid growth in unregistered children's homes is one symptom of the wider sufficiency crisis. Ofsted identified almost three times as many unregistered settings in 2023-24 as in 2021-22[11]. Many of these settings care for only one child, increasing the risk of isolation[12].

Children with the most complex needs can be particularly affected. Where there are not enough suitable homes for children with complex health needs, mental health needs, or significant risks, they can end up in emergency, unregistered and highly restrictive settings.

For some children, restrictions from Deprivation of Liberty (DoL) orders can further limit contact with the people who matter to them. Applications for these orders have increased dramatically, with the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory estimating a fourteenfold increase since 2016/17[13].

The supported accommodation framework is based on young people receiving support rather than care, with a primary focus on preparing them for independence. While this can be the right option for some young people, concerns were raised that children are sometimes moved into supported accommodation before they are ready, or when the setting is unable to meet their relational and emotional needs.

Given that supported accommodation is often intended as a stepping stone towards adulthood rather than a long-term home, concerns have been raised whether staff have sufficient capacity, training and continuity to help children build and maintain the enduring relationships that are so important to their wellbeing.

> **"Children, young people 16+ do need care. […] I think we've got to really define what care means for young people and to look at that."**
>
> – Wendy Williams, National Association of Supported Accommodation Providers (sector evidence session on supported accommodation)

Stability is essential to enduring relationships

Repeated moves and disruption do more than break individual relationships. They can change how children experience relationships altogether. When children repeatedly lose people they care about, have little control over when relationships end, or are moved between unfamiliar homes, schools, and communities, it becomes harder to trust that relationships will last.

> **"(It) affected my trust - I thought I shouldn't even bother unpacking at new foster parents"**
>
> – Care-experienced young person

11 Ofsted (2024), *Unregistered children's homes: transparency data*
12 Ibid.
13 Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (2026), *New data shows deprivation of liberty applications continue to rise.*

This affects children's confidence in forming new relationships and their willingness to invest in them. Some children may become cautious about becoming close to people because they have learned that relationships can be disrupted or taken away. Others may feel the need to protect themselves by keeping people at a distance.

Stability does not mean that every relationship can or should continue, but when change is unavoidable, children should be supported to understand what is happening, maintain important connections where possible and have the opportunity to say goodbye.

> **"There is also a psychological impact of such moves, where children protect themselves against future grief and disappointment by not allowing themselves to be open to forming new relationships."**
>
> – written evidence received from Prof Rachel Hillier, Prof Lisa Holmes, and Dr Eva Sprecher

Building a more stable care system

Throughout our inquiry we heard how shortages of appropriate homes, poor planning, and a broken care 'market' are driving the instability that children are experiencing.

The Government has introduced important reforms to begin to address some of these challenges, including plans to increase the number of foster care places by 10, 000 within the next three years, the development of Regional Care Co-operatives to change the way care is planned, commissioned and provided; and measures intended to prevent children entering care unnecessarily.

These reforms are welcome. But the scale of the challenge demands further ambition. We cannot build a care system centred on enduring relationships if the system itself repeatedly breaks rather than protects children's relationships.

> **"I think sometimes all we're doing [...] is trying to repair the damage that has been caused by the care system and wouldn't it be good if we could go back a step and prevent the damage in the first place?"**
>
> – Harriet Waldegrave, Children's Commissioner's Office (Sector evidence session on oversight and accountability)

Homes that meet children's needs

Local authorities have a legal duty to secure sufficient suitable accommodation for children in their care and to keep them living close to home, so far as reasonably practicable[14].

Yet local authorities across England face significant challenges in meeting this duty. In recent years, the number of children in care has grown, while the availability of suitable foster carers has fallen and the number of children requiring more specialist provision has increased.

14 This is known as the "sufficiency duty" and is contained in The Children Act 1989 S22C

Good practice

The Mockingbird Programme, led by the Fostering Network, creates supportive communities of foster and kinship families designed to mirror the relationships and support of an extended family. Small networks of families, known as constellations, are connected through an experienced hub home that provides practical support, respite care, social activities and opportunities for children and carers to build lasting relationships. Evaluations suggest the programme improves stability for children, strengthens support networks for carers, and helps improve recruitment and retention of foster carers*.

*The Fostering Network (2025), *The Mockingbird programme*

The result is a national shortage of appropriate homes and carers in the right places. This is not simply a shortage of places overall: there are particular gaps in provision for children with complex needs, significant risks or specialist health and support needs. Where suitable homes are not available, children can be moved away from home, placed in settings that don't meet their needs or accommodated in unregistered provision.

These pressures are also being felt across the boundaries between children's social care: health and youth justice. We heard in our evidence sessions that children and young people who might previously have been supported in specialist Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) inpatient provision or through youth justice are increasingly being accommodated within the care system. At the same time, there have been recent policy changes aimed at reducing the use of children and young people living in CAMHS Tier 4 inpatient settings and the youth justice system.[15]

These changes have important implications for the care system. Government policy across children's social care, health and justice must therefore be joined up. Reducing provision in one part of the system without ensuring that appropriate alternatives are available elsewhere can add to the sufficiency pressures and ultimately, increase instability for children.

Foster care sufficiency

Around two-thirds of children in care live with foster carers, yet the number of mainstream foster carers fell by almost 8, 000 between 2019 and 2025, driven largely by a 19% reduction in local authority-approved foster carers[16].

At the same time, the number of children's homes and supported accommodation settings has grown rapidly[17].

This shift matters because foster care remains the setting in which most children in care live. A shortage of foster carers can mean that children who could and should be supported in foster care are instead moved into residential provision, reducing opportunities for them to experience the stability, sense of belonging and family life that fostering can provide, and making it harder to stay connected to the people who matter to them.

The Government's national fostering strategy, including its ambition to increase the number of children that can live with foster carers, is an important response. We welcome the £25m of capital investment to expand the Room Makers scheme, so that experienced foster carers are better able

15 Ofsted (2024), *How local authorities and children's homes can achieve stability and permanence for children with complex needs*
16 Department for Education (2026), Renewing fostering: homes for 10, 000 more children
17 Ofsted (2025), Main findings: children's social care in England 2025

to accommodate siblings, and the expansion and redesign of regional fostering hubs could also help improve recruitment and streamline the application process[18].

> **"When we had the Ukraine crisis overnight, we had 80,000 inquiries, 80,000 people came forward. And why can't we do that for fostering? It is a crisis. We are struggling to find foster carers locally for our children. So let's try and do that. We need national campaigns."**
>
> – Ishara Tewary, London Borough of Greenwich (Sector evidence session on fostering sufficiency)

A national recruitment campaign could help raise awareness of fostering[19], but it must sit alongside action to make fostering sustainable and attractive for carers and should be designed sensitively so it doesn't commodify children. Young people told us that some forms of marketing and messaging about fostering can be upsetting.

As these reforms are implemented, success should not be measured solely by the number of new foster carers recruited. Government, local authorities and regional fostering hubs should also consider whether they are increasing the availability of foster homes for children who are currently less well-served by the fostering system, including older teenagers, children with complex needs and sibling groups.

However, recruitment alone will not solve the problem. Retention is equally important. Around 5,000 fostering households have deregistered each year over the past six years, and nationally there is an ageing population of foster carers[20].

Recommendation

The Department for Education should fund and deliver a sustained national recruitment campaign to support the effective delivery of the national fostering strategy, alongside measures to improve foster care retention.

Improved matching

Finding the right home is not simply about finding a vacancy. It's about finding a home that can meet a child's needs while protecting the relationships and connections that matter to them.

Poor matching increases the risk of a placement breakdown and further moves. Yet matching can be made more difficult by limited information, time pressures and a lack of transparency about available provision. This is particularly important when children need to be moved at short notice.

Local authorities don't always have visibility of foster carers approved by Independent Fostering Agencies, meaning potential matches can be missed.

A national register of foster carers, searchable by geographical area, and including availability, would

18 Department for Education (2026), Renewing fostering: homes for 10, 000 more children
19 The Department for Education launched a national recruitment campaign on 13th October 2026. See Department for Education, (press release 14 October 2026), National call to recruit more foster carers launched at Number 10
20 Department for Education (2026), Renewing fostering: homes for 10, 000 more children

improve matching and make it easier to identify homes that enable children to remain close to family, friends and community.

Recommendation

The Department for Education introduces a national register of local authority and independent foster carers, including foster carers who are available to foster children, which is searchable by geographical area.

The marketisation of Children's Social Care

Children's social care is delivered through a mix of local authority, and independent provision made up of private (profit-making) and voluntary sector provision.

Over recent decades, there's been a reduction in care settings provided by local authorities and a significant growth in the role of the private sector. In 2025, 84% of children's homes[21], and 87% of supported accommodation settings[22] were provided by the private, for-profit, sector, whilst 45% of mainstream foster carers were approved by Independent Fostering Agencies[23].

Throughout our inquiry we heard concerns that decisions about where children live can be driven too heavily by price and availability rather than children's needs and relationships.

> **"I've seen companies and charities refused contracts because they wouldn't bring their pay down to minimum wage. So all of this is a result of market forces in a system that says, your most important job is to get prices down or keep it minimised."**
>
> **– Kathy Evans (Sector evidence session on Regional Care Co-operatives)**

Rising costs have also placed significant pressure on local authorities. Spending on children in care has more than doubled since 2016, from £3.9 billion to £9 billion, driven in part by a substantial increase in spending on children's residential care[24]. Although the number of children living in children's homes has risen by around 24% during this period, spending has increased by 235%, highlighting the sharp rise in cost of this type of provision[25], particularly where specialist provision is required for children with more complex needs[26].

Rising costs have increased financial pressures on local authorities, with almost all councils overspending on their children's social care budgets[27], and concerns about the financial sustainability of some local authorities[28].

21 Ofsted (2025), Main findings: children's social care in England 2025
22 Ibid.
23 Ofsted (2025), Main findings: fostering in England 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025.
24 See Department for Education (2025), LA and school expenditure: financial year 2024-25
25 See Department for Education (2025), LA and school expenditure: financial year 2024-25. See also Department for Education (2025), *Children Looked After in England, including Adoptions: time series*
26 Local Government Association (2023), *High-cost children's social care placements survey*
27 Institute for Government (2025), *Performance Tracker 2025: Children's social care*
28 Goodier and Butler (30 September 2026), *'Sixteen English councils spend more than 80% of core funding on social care',* The Guardian

Through our inquiry we heard that places in private children's homes often cost local authorities more than those in publicly-owned homes. This reflects, in part, the financial burdens and risks independent providers take on when opening new homes.

There have also been longstanding concerns about profiteering among some of the largest private children's homes providers. The Government is seeking to address this through measures in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026, including a new financial oversight mechanism and the potential introduction of a profit cap[29].

Local authorities have little control over placement costs in children's homes, particularly when moves are unplanned and secured through spot purchasing.

In response, several local authorities have opened, or are planning to open, their own children's homes. Some are developing tailored settings for specific groups of children, including sibling groups, children with complex mental health needs, and those at risk of harm.

Since 2021, successive Governments have made significant capital investment in building, expanding and maintaining children's homes[30]. However, we heard that many local authorities are unable to afford the capital investment needed to develop new residential provision without increasing their overall debt burdens. This can make it difficult to justify investment where the costs are incurred up front, but the benefits – including potential cost savings and improved outcomes for children – are realised over a longer period.

Sustainable capital investment is needed to help local authorities expand in-house provision, so more children can stay close to the people, places and communities that matter to them.

Recommendation

The Treasury and Department for Education should explore options to increase the availability of capital funding available to local authorities to expand in-house residential provision where this is needed, with this investment treated as strategic social infrastructure spending.

Children's homes where children need them

Children's homes are often concentrated in areas where land and property is cheaper rather than where children need them most. This contributes to some children being moved far from home, particularly those requiring specialist provision, separating them from the people and places that matter to them.

Children living in profit-making homes are more likely to live far from home than those in local authority or not-for-profit provision[31]. In part, this reflects the fact that local authority provision is generally used for children within that local authority's area.

Where children's homes are independently run, local authorities have less control over which children are placed in them. This means suitable local homes may not be available to local children. Providers

29 *Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026*
30 See HM Treasury (2021), *Autumn Budget and Spending Review 2021*; and HM Treasury (2025), *Spending Review 2025*
31 Research showed that in 2023/24 children living in children's homes run by private providers were 2.5 times more likely to be living more than 20 miles from home than children living in homes run by the voluntary sector, the local authority, or other public organisations and agencies. See Become (2024), *Still Too Far: Children in care being moved miles from the people and places that matter to them*

are paid when homes are occupied but continue to incur costs when they are empty, creating an incentive to fill places quickly, regardless of where children are from. Providers can also refuse or select referrals, while there are limited financial or regulatory incentives to prioritise local children.

Research has highlighted promising examples of local authorities and providers working together to plan provision around local need and to protect places for local children[32]. Regional Care Co-operatives could help build on this by giving local authorities' greater collective purchasing and a stronger voice in shaping provision.

Early experience from RCC pathfinders suggests that this approach can improve coordination between providers and local authorities. We heard how in Greater Manchester, the RCC negotiated an agreement with one provider whereby the provider will give early notice and hold vacancies, whilst the ten local authorities in the region check if that matches their needs.

In August, the Government announced that five new RCC pathfinders had been recruited, in addition to the two recruited in 2024, as part of its drive to roll out RCCs across the country. In total, more than 100 local authorities are now part of RCCs – well over half of all local authorities in the country[33].

However, the new arrangements must also have clear accountability and oversight. As RCCs become more established, children and the public need to know who is responsible for decisions that affect children's lives and relationships, and how performance will be scrutinised.

Recommendation

We recommend that the Department for Education develop, publish and implement plans, as soon as possible, to introduce accountability mechanisms and measures for Regional Care Co-operatives that assess how they are planning and delivering sufficiency.

Quicker registration of children's homes

We heard that delay's in registering new children's homes can prevent suitable local provision from opening, contributing to avoidable moves and pressure elsewhere in the system.

Ofsted has received a significant increase in registration applications, while some providers and local authorities reported waiting many months for homes to be registered. In part, this is a result of the new regulatory framework for supported accommodation, introduced in 2023[34].

> **"We've got children's homes ready and we can't get them inspected and signed off by Ofsted [...] we've had homes ready to go that have sat for six months, unable to take any young people because Ofsted haven't been to sign them off as being able to be used."**
>
> – Dr Mark Kerr, Children's Homes Association (Sector evidence session on children's homes and unregistered accommodation)

32 Become (2025), *Good practice report: Gone Too Far*
33 Department for Education (2026), *Regional Care Co-operatives: guidance*
34 Department for Education (2023), *Guide to the Supported Accommodation Regulations, including Quality Standards*

We heard from Ofsted that many applications they receive either do not provide all the required information, do not demonstrate a clear local need for the proposed provision, or are not ready to open, for example because planning permission hadn't been secured. Ofsted have introduced prioritisation criteria, to focus its resources on applications for homes that provide specialist support for children with complex needs or are in areas of particularly high demand[35].

> **"The problem is that most of them cannot evidence that they want to open homes in the right places to meet need. So, what we've tried to do, because we want to make the best use of our resources [...] we need to prioritise what's best for children first, where there is a real need, and not spend our resource dealing with applications where they might not be needed or where children may end up living somewhere far from their home, because they're being open in places that isn't going to meet the needs of any children."**
>
> – Matthew Brazier, Ofsted (Sector evidence session on oversight and accountability)

The Government also plans to give local authorities and regional care co-operatives greater control over where new children's homes can open, through changes to Ofsted's registration process[36] and the planning process[37].

We welcome plans to strengthen requirements around location assessments for new residential provision. Children's homes should be developed where there is a clear local need. These changes should also help Ofsted triage applications where providers can't demonstrate local authority support or evidence local need.

Recommendation

The Department for Education strengthens requirements around location assessments as part of Ofsted's registration process to include a requirement for providers to secure written support from the local authority demonstrating local need for the provision.

Recommendation

Following changes to the Ofsted registration process, Ofsted introduces a triaging process to address the backlog of children's homes applications, with criteria including whether planning permission has been granted and whether there is written support of local need for the provision.

35 Ofsted (2026), Registering children's homes: prioritising applications
36 Department for Education (2026), Delivering the children's social care reset: an implementation plan for local partners
37 Ofsted, (press release: 2nd July 2026), "Ofsted outlines plans to tackle sharp growth in unregistered children's homes"

Better sufficiency planning

Local authorities have a duty to plan for sufficient accommodation, but too many lack a clear understanding of current and future need. Research in 2022 found that almost half of local authorities didn't have a published sufficiency strategy[38].

Under the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026, regional care co-operatives are now required to develop and publish sufficiency strategies. Better data is essential - local and regional planning should identify not only how many homes are required to meet the diverse needs of children in care, but what types of homes, where they are needed and which groups of children are currently least well served.

> **"We talked earlier about the lack of consistently good sufficiency strategies. [...] If there's a better understanding, better use of data, probably listen to children more often, then they could commission more appropriately."**
>
> – Matthew Brazier, Ofsted (Sector evidence session on oversight and accountability)

Planning should also recognise the value of additional capacity. A system operating permanently at full capacity leaves social workers with little choice when a child needs to move urgently. Some additional capacity can make the difference between a carefully matched local move and an emergency move far from home.

Stronger local oversight and accountability

Many of the sufficiency challenges that local authorities face are national problems that affect local authorities across the country. However, local authorities also take different approaches to delivering sufficiency, with varying levels of success.

Ofsted is strengthening its approach to sufficiency through reforms to the Inspecting Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) inspection framework, which will consider factors such as local authority's approaches to workforce planning, commissioning and increasing capacity[39]. Under Ofsted's proposals, the use of unregistered provision would act as a limiting criterion, preventing a local authority from being judged as achieving the "expected standard" if it has moved a child into unregistered provision[40].

This is welcome, but inspections should go further by examining whether local authorities are effectively planning for the homes that children need and the impact of sufficiency on children's relationships.

Inspections should also include consideration of whether children are being:

- Separated from their siblings because suitable provision is unavailable
- Moved into settings that do not align with their care plans

38 Ofsted (2022), How local authorities plan for sufficiency of accommodation that meets the needs of children in care and care leavers.

39 Ofsted (2026), Improving the way Ofsted inspects children's social care: consultation document

40 Ibid.

- Accommodated in unregistered provision; or
- Moved far from home because appropriate local options are unavailable.

These outcomes should be understood as potential indicators of gaps in sufficiency, rather than simply individual placement decisions.

Recommendation

The Ofsted inspection framework for local authority children's services is strengthened to include clear evaluation criteria about the extent to which local authorities are delivering sufficiency.

We need to understand the scale of instability

The data available on children's social care does not yet give us a complete picture of how instability affects children's relationships.

In 2024, the National Social Care Dashboard was introduced to bring together key indicators and monitor progress towards the outcomes and enablers set out in the National Children's Social Care Framework[41]. Yet, there remains a significant gap in the data available about children's relationships and the factors that can undermine them.

There is no standardised national data on how many children are separated from siblings, living in unregistered accommodation, living in settings that do not reflect their care plan, or living far from home because appropriate local provision is unavailable.

> **"DFE does not know how many children are in inappropriate settings for them. It knows how many children are in care and how many are in residential settings, but not if they are in a home that is suited to their current needs assessment. The data indicates, and I think the DFE and Ofsted and everybody agrees, that actually there are children not in appropriate settings"**
>
> – Emma Willson, National Audit Office (Sector evidence session on children's homes and unregistered accommodation)

Without a clearer picture of the scale of these problems, it's harder to plan effectively or hold the system to account.

41 Department for Education (2026), Children's social care dashboard: guidance

Recommendation

The Department for Education collect and publish annual data on the number of children who are:

- **living apart from their siblings.**
- **living in unregistered accommodation;**
- **living in care settings that do not reflect their care plan;**
- **living more than 20 miles from home due to an absence of appropriate local homes or carers.**

This information should sit alongside the Government's work to measure enduring relationships. Together, these measures would show not only whether children have trusted relationships, but whether the care system is making it possible for them to maintain them.

A legal framework that protects children's relationships

The Children Act 1989 places duties on local authorities to secure appropriate homes and to keep children close to home so far as reasonably practicable[42]. However, the qualification of what is "reasonably practicable" can mean that these duties are weakened when suitable provision is unavailable.

Throughout our inquiry, we heard concern that this can contribute to a culture in which separation from family, friends and trusted adults is treated as an unavoidable consequence of being in care.

> **"It should be hard to separate a child from their siblings."**
>
> – Harriet Waldegrave, Children's Commissioner's Office (Sector evidence session on oversight and accountability)

Scotland provides one example of a stronger legislative presumption around sibling relationships. Since 2021, Scottish regulations require siblings to be placed together where appropriate or, where this is not possible, to live near one another[43].

The Government should consider whether the legal framework in England gives children's relationships sufficient protection.

42 The Children's Act 1989, S22C and S22G
43 The Looked After Children (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2021.

Part 3: Practice can protect and help build relationships

Across England, there's significant variation in practice that supports children's relationships. Children in care can experience a postcode lottery in access to support and good practice, with very different experiences even within the same region or local authority

Throughout our inquiry, we heard examples of practice that went beyond simply enabling contact; they helped children build, protect and strengthen the relationships that matter to them.

Prioritising children's relationships

The care system must change so that relationships are treated as a core part of care. They should not be an additional consideration once decisions about placements, schools, and services have been made – they should be part of care planning from the beginning, with children supported to identify the people, communities and connections that matter to them.

This means listening to children, understanding their relationships and making clear who is responsible for helping them maintain and strengthen those connections.

Recommendation

Care planning and reviews should identify the relationships that matter to each child and set out how important family, friendship, community and cultural connections will be protected, maintained and strengthened, with clearly assigned responsibility for putting these plans into practice.

Decision-making and children's voice

Throughout our inquiry, we heard that children often don't feel listened to, heard or properly considered in decisions about their lives. Despite existing duties[44], where children experienced a move or change in contact arrangements, many told us they weren't consulted beforehand or given the opportunity to share how they felt during the process.

Being heard, listened to and given a sense of agency and dignity is particularly important for children in care with disabilities or health conditions. Many told us that their disabilities were not understood and, in the most concerning cases, that their disabilities were used as a reason to limit or deny appropriate care. Children also told us that their wishes were not always sought or heard in relation to their disability.

Children need to be meaningfully involved in decisions that affect them. We heard that information was not always shared with children in a way they could understand or with enough notice.

44 The Children's Act 1989, S22C

Some children felt guilty or responsible when contact arrangements changed, without understanding why contact had stopped or visits had changed. This can affect children's confidence and trust.

> **"I used to see [my] Mum and older brother three times a week. It has been cut down to once a week, and this makes me sad. I don't know why contact was cut down."**
>
> - Care-experienced child

Good practice

Coventry's reunification services provides intensive, wraparound support to children and families before, during and after a return home. A multi-agency team, including social workers, adolescent support workers and family therapists, helps families strengthen relationships and navigate challenges together, including supporting school routines, activities and planning for difficult situations.

Since the service was established, Coventry has supported 50 children and young people to reunify with their families and estimates it has generated around £4 million in savings by reducing the need for children to re-enter care.*

* Local Government Association (2025), *Coventry City Council's reunification project.*

Children's views and feelings can change over time, as can their relationships and priorities. Listening therefore needs to be an-going part of care planning, rather than something that happens only when a care plan is first made.

Children should not have to fear that expressing a view will make them responsible for what happens next. They need adults to explain decisions clearly, listen to their response and help them understand what can and cannot change.

Routinely seeking children's views and feedback should be a core part of practice. Children should be supported to identify who is important to them, express what they need from those relationships and have a meaningful say in how they are maintained. This can help children develop confidence in their own voice and understand that their views and relationships matter.

Good practice

The Lifelong Links programme, developed by Family Rights Group, helps care-experienced children and young people identify, rebuild and strengthen relationships with family members, friends and other trusted adults who are important to them through a child-led process.

Independent evaluations show that LifeLong Links increases supportive family and friendship connections, strengthens children's sense of identity and belonging, and improves placement stability.*

*The Family Rights Group (2024), *Lifelong Links*

Recommendation

Care planning should be strengthened to ensure that, as far as possible, children are meaningfully involved in decisions that impact on their relationships. This should be monitored and assessed through Ofsted's inspection of local authority children's services.

Good practice

A young person told us how spending time in respite care with carers they already knew, including former foster carers and carers who had looked after their siblings, helped make a period of change feel less overwhelming. Existing relationships and trust provided continuity, stability and a sense of familiarity at a difficult time. Wherever possible, local authorities should identify and make use of trusted relationships that already exist around a child wherever possible.

Planning for disruption should also be broader. It should cover school and home moves, changes to contact arrangements, changes in social worker or Personal Adviser, and preparation for leaving care. Plans should identify who is responsible for maintaining important relationships and what will happen if circumstances change.

Recommendation

Care planning and reviews should proactively plan for unavoidable changes and predictable points of disruption, with clear actions to protect important relationships, minimise unnecessary disruption, and ensure that any changes are carefully planned, clearly explained and emotionally supported.

Reunification

A key principle of the Children Act 1989 is that children should maintain relationships with their family wherever possible, with reunification remaining an important goal. Reunification is also the most common route for children to leave care[45]. Yet, despite this, reunification is often under-planned and under-supported: 59% of local authorities have no formal reunification strategy, and only 19% have specialist reunification teams[46].

Evidence suggests that many reunifications break down, leading to children re-entering care. We heard that financial pressures can make it difficult for local authorities to provide the level of support families need before, during and after a child returns home[47]. However, we also heard examples of how sustained support helped reunification succeed and reduced the need for future interventions.

We heard that reunification should not be treated as a single event, but as a process that begins long before a child returns home. Participants emphasised the importance of understanding children's and families' wishes at an early stage and planning proactively for how reunification can be achieved safely and sustainably.

Effective reunification brings significant benefits. The Government spends over £300m each year on children re-entering care when a return home fails[48]. As well as reducing the costs associated with

45 NSPCC (2024), *Home Again*
46 Foundations (2025), *Reunification Practice Guide, Evidence Annex*
47 NSPCC (2024), *Home Again*
48 Foundations (2025), *Reunification Practice Guide*

children re-entering care, it can strengthen family relationships, improve emotional wellbeing, and build wider networks of support around children and families[49].

Experts in the sector told us that there needs to be a cultural shift away from viewing care as a permanent replacement for family, towards understanding care as a supportive extension of family, where that is safe and appropriate. This approach would embed reunification planning from the beginning of a child's care journey and encourage shared planning with children and families.

Maintaining and strengthening relationships throughout a child's time in care is a vital part of this approach. We therefore welcome the Government's commitment through its Enduring Relationships Strategy to expand family-finding services, such as LifeLong Links, across all local authorities[50]. Approaches such as genograms and Lifelong Links, these services can help children identify the people who are important to them and build stronger networks of support.

These relationships should be revisited as children's wishes, circumstances and safety needs change over time. Stronger family and support networks benefit children whether reunification takes place or not. Where a return home is safe and appropriate, they can provide the foundations for a stable and lasting reunification. Where it is not, they can still help children maintain a sense of identity, belonging and connection.

Recommendation

The Department for Education should establish dedicated grant funding for local authorities to develop and expand evidence-based family reunification practice, alongside strengthened national guidance on effective approaches to supporting children to return home safely and sustainably.

Supportive adults and lasting relationships

Good practice

We heard from an Independent Visitor (IV) who organised joint visits for siblings who each had an IV. This allowed children to maintain their individual relationship with their IV while also spending time together as siblings, sharing days out and building positive memories and connections.

The Government recognises the value of consistent adult relationships to children's wellbeing and attachment through its Enduring Relationships strategy[51]. Our inquiry reinforced how important supportive adults can be to children in care.

Independent Visitors (IVs) are an important but under-used source of support, with just 3.3% of children in care matched with an IV[52]. Unlike many professional relationships, an IV relationship is voluntary and non-hierarchical. This can provide children with the reassurance of a trusted adult who offers friendship, consistency and support without professional responsibilities attached to the relationship.

IVs can help children understand what healthy relationships look and feel like, while supporting

49 Ibid.
50 Department for Education (2026), Enduring relationships for care-experienced children
51 Department for Education (2026), Enduring relationships for care-experienced children
52 NIVN (2022) The National Independent Visitor Data Report

wellbeing, confidence and emotional security. They can also broaden children's experiences by helping them develop life skills, access new activities, and build connections with their local communities[53].

Quality matching is essential. However, there are not enough IVs for all children who could benefit from one, and some children from minoritised backgrounds or with disabilities experience longer waits where targeted recruitment may be needed[54]. Children living out of area can also face additional barriers to accessing an IV. For children with marginalised identities, including those related to religion, sexuality, ethnicity, disability and language, a well-matched IV can provide an important source of connection to their identity, culture and community.

> **"Having a dedicated adult who chooses to show up, someone who cares, listens and wants to see them thrive, can be deeply affirming. This helps young people build self-worth, which in turn shapes how they relate to others and how they see themselves in the world."**
>
> - Beth Vecchione, Care to Dance (evidence survey)

Despite children's statutory right to an IV,[55] awareness remains low among children, professionals and the wider public. Low take-up appears to be linked to recruitment challenges, waiting lists, commissioning arrangements, local authority investment and placement instability. We also heard that pathways into the role can be difficult to navigate, and can vary across different local authorities

National co-ordination and investment could help expand access to IVs and reduce waiting times. . We heard suggestions that people interested in fostering, but unable to commit to the role, could be encouraged to explore becoming an IV.

We also heard support for enabling former carers and other trusted adults to continue positive relationships with children through the IV role, where appropriate and in the child's best interests. More broadly, evidence suggests that positive relationships do not always continue after formal roles or placements come to an end[56]. This highlights the importance of creating pathways that help children maintain trusted adult relationships wherever possible.

Recommendation

The Department for Education and local authorities should strengthen access to Independent Visitors through by increasing investment, improving recruitment and awareness, and developing more flexible pathways into the role. This should include:

- **encouraging prospective foster carers who do not complete an application to become Independent Visitors; and**
- **enabling former carers or other trusted adults with existing relationships to continue supporting children as an Independent Visitor where appropriate and in the child's best interests.**

53 NIVN (2024), *A Friend Indeed*
54 NIVN (2022), *The National Independent Visitor Data Report*
55 UK Legislation (2026), *Children Act 1989*
56 The Fostering Network (2019), *Not Forgotten: The importance of keeping in touch with former foster carers*

Mentoring and befriending schemes can also provide children with trusted adult relationships and valuable sources of support, which can provide continuity during the transition when leaving care. Unlike IVs, these services are not a statutory entitlement for children in care. They encompass a range of approaches, from befriending relationships that provide connection and emotional support, to mentoring relationships that help children build confidence, develop skills and work towards their goals.

Evidence suggests that these relationships can provide practical guidance and emotional support during periods of change and transition, increase confidence and self-esteem, help children to build social connections and introduce them to new environments and activities[57]. Mentoring programmes have also been associated with improvements in mental health, social acceptance, and coping skills.

We also heard how supported lodgings can play a similar role in providing an additional trusted adult relationship for young people prior to, during and after the transition from leaving care.

Good practice

Supported lodgings enables young people to experience the benefits of family life while preparing for adulthood. Home for Good's Voices of Supported Lodgings research found that young people valued the sense of belonging, stability and genuine care provided by hosts. Many described hosts as trusted adults who remained in their lives beyond the placement itself, providing ongoing support and a lasting sense of connection*.

* Home for Good (2024), *The Voices of Supported Lodgings: Strong foundations for our future*

Recommendation

Care planning should identify when a child would benefit from a mentoring, befriending, family-finding or Independent Visitor service and ensure they are connected to appropriate support to help build and maintain meaningful relationships.

Equipping the workforce

Training

Adults working with children in care – including social workers, foster carers and residential and supported accommodation workers – need the knowledge, skills and confidence to help children maintain and build long-lasting, healthy relationships.

This includes understanding the impact that trauma and instability can have on relationships, as well as recognising the importance of culture, religion, identity, disability and communication needs. Professionals should be equipped to support children to connect with their identity, culture and community, particularly when a child is not culturally matched or is living in a predominantly white British region.

Throughout the inquiry, many children and young people - particularly those from minoritised backgrounds or with certain protected characteristics – told us that professionals did not understand

57 Foundations (2025), *Mentoring and Befriending*

them or know how to support them.

We heard that language barriers can be a significant challenge for some unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. When children are supported by adults who do not share their primary language, important needs may go unidentified or unmet, and less attention may be given to helping them maintain social connections and relationships.

Children told us that disabilities were sometimes dismissed or not believed, and that some didn't receive appropriate care or had medicines or treatment withheld. There aren't enough professionals and carers with the training and skills needed to support children with disabilities and complex needs. This can contribute to home instability and inadequate care.

When children don't feel understood by the adults around them, this can damage their relationships with carers and affect how they learn to trust others. Workforce development should therefore recognise that understanding a child's identity, disability, culture and communication needs is part of relational practice.

Training alone will not ensure children can build and sustain important relationships. Professionals caring for children need to actively support relationships as part of every day care. This means helping children to spend meaningful time together with the people who matter to them and to develop positive peer relationships. This should be considered alongside, rather than through formal care planning, and should reflect the child's wishes, circumstances and best interests.

Recommendation

The Department for Education should review and update the professional standards, training frameworks and qualification requirements for children's social care professionals, including social workers, foster carers and residential care workers, to ensure they include competencies on supporting children to develop and sustain healthy, enduring relationships, alongside a core understanding of trauma, stigma, culture, religion, identity and belonging.

Risk averse practice

Keeping children safe from harm is essential. However, we heard that, in some cases, processes intended to protect children can unintentionally and unnecessarily limit opportunities to build and maintain stable, supportive relationships that are themselves an important protective factor in children's lives.

We heard that children were sometimes unable to develop friendships and sibling relationships in the same ways as their peers because sleepovers, visits and informal time together could require extensive risk assessments, police checks and lengthy approval processes.

A risk averse culture can also make it harder for children to develop close relationships with the adults around them. Fears of allegations and over-cautious approaches can limit how emotional bonds form between children and important adults and professionals. For example, some foster carers may feel unable to hug children or allow them into their room. This can create a physical and emotional barrier between the child and adult.

These approaches can have unintended consequences. Risk assessments, checks and approvals can

expose a child's care-experience to friends before the child wants to share it, increase the likelihood of children feeling different from their peers, and remove ordinary opportunities to build relationships.

> **"[…] And that in a way speaks to the biggest mindset shift that we need, which is away from the system built around reducing adult professional anxiety and towards one which is obsessed with enduring loving relationships."**
>
> – Josh MacAlister MP OBE, Minister for Children and Families (Sector evidence session)

For 16 and 17-year-olds living in supported accommodation, being able to spend time with friends and welcome visitors is an important part of developing independence, maintaining relationships and feeling that their living space is their own. However, we recognise that some visitors may pose a genuine risk of harm, abuse or exploitation[58]. Children living in these settings need to be able to maintain important relationships and feel that their living space is their own, including being able to have loved ones visit where this is safe.

The challenge is to balance these considerations without unnecessarily restricting children's relationships or compromising their safety. Decisions about visitors should take account of the individual young person's wishes, circumstances and relationships, as well as any specific risks. Appropriate safeguards are essential, but they should be applied in ways that enable children to maintain important connections with the people who matter to them, including welcoming loved ones to visit where this can be done safely.

> **"Nobody was allowed into [my] flat if they didn't have ID. They had to be aged between 16 and 25 if they weren't related to you, and if they were related to you, they had to be an immediate family member (…) it was quite difficult for them to come to me."**
>
> – Care-experienced young person

We heard a strong call for foster carers, residential workers and supported accommodation staff to have the trust, clarity and flexibility to make everyday decisions that help children stay connected to the people who matter to them. This includes spending time with friends and family, taking part in social activities, and welcoming friends, family and other loved ones into their home where it is safe to do so.

Safeguarding and relational practice should work together. Risk should be assessed proportionately, with children's relationships considered as part of decision-making, rather than treated as an obstacle to it. Clear, evidence-based guidance and practical examples of good practice could support carers, providers and professionals to make balanced decisions that protect children from harm while enabling them to build and maintain meaningful relationships.

58 Ofsted (2024), *A rapid review of evidence on supported accommodation*

Recommendation

Risk should be assessed holistically and proportionately, with children's relationships considered as part of decision-making and supported wherever possible, in line with their best interests.

Funding

For many local authorities, financial constraints make good relational practice harder to deliver. Practical support that helps children maintain relationships can be deprioritised, including support for children to participate in extra-curricular activities, enrichment hobbies, school trips and visits to important relationships in a child's former or original home area.

Children should not lose important relationships because the practical cost of maintaining them is not covered.

Local authorities should support transport costs where this is necessary for children and young people to visit loved ones and maintain in-person contact. The definition of an important relationship must be flexible enough to reflect the individual child's circumstances and the relationships that matter to them.

> **"Because [I] was out of area, and the fact that I was semi-independent meant I was on my own money now, so I couldn't take the bus or whatever else to go see my friends. I did a sleepover at one point, and it was 2 hours and 30 minutes on a bunch of different buses."**
>
> – Care-experienced young person

Protecting children's relationships

Good practice

One young person told us how their foster carer played an active role in supporting their relationships with wider family members, gradually helping them move from supervised contact to unsupervised visits. By taking a child-centred approach and responding to the young person's wishes, the foster carer helped create the conditions for stronger, more independent and lasting family relationships.

There has been some welcome progress in recent years, including measures in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act to strengthen contact between siblings[59]. However, we heard that many children who are separated from important people in their lives continue to face practical barriers to maintaining those relationships. Too often, children are left to navigate these challenges without the support, flexibility or resources needed to stay connected to the people who matter to them.

Contact arrangements

Contact between children and their families can sometimes take place in sterile or formal environments, making natural and comfortable

59 Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act (2026), S10

connection more difficult.

This can be particularly challenging where a relationship has already experienced disruption and needs time to rebuild trust and connection. Some children and young people told us that clinical contact settings could also discourage family members from continuing to attend.

Contact should take place in comfortable, informal spaces that allow natural interaction wherever this is safe and appropriate. Activities can help children and family members reconnect, particularly where conversation alone feels difficult. Children should be involved in decisions about when, where and how contact takes place.

Recommendation

Contact arrangements should be child-centred, flexible and designed around natural connection, with children involved in decisions about the setting, timing and activities.

Good practice

We heard positive examples about teachers that maintained contact over email or text with children who experienced a school or home move. This allowed children to keep up with schoolwork during the transition period, while preserving an important, trusted adult relationship, supporting their confidence, self-esteem and engagement with learning.

Digital isolation

Physical distance when children are moved far away from home areas, schools and important relationships can be compounded by digital exclusion. One young person described not having access to technology as "so isolating from the whole world".

Access to technology can provide a consistent way for children to maintain relationships when they are separated from close relationships and connections. For children who cannot organise visits or travel independently, technology can provide an important bridge, enabling them to maintain relationships.

Changes to social media access for under 16s will also need to be considered in relation to children in care, particularly children from minoritised groups including LGBTQ+ children, who may use online spaces to find community, connection and a sense of belonging.

Carers and residential workers should have a basic understanding of online safety and be able to support children to use technology safely, while avoiding unnecessary restrictions on positive relationships

Recommendation

Children in care should have access to age-appropriate phones, devices, connectivity and digital support to help them maintain important relationships, with appropriate safeguards in place where needed.

Supporting children to build enduring relationships

When children in care move away from their home area, they can lose more than family and immediate relationships. They can also be separated from the wider community around them.

A school move can mean losing access to after-school clubs, sports teams and groups where children have built friendships and relationships. Moving areas can mean leaving youth groups, youth councils, sports clubs and other places where children find connection, fulfilment and opportunities to learn about themselves and others.

They can help children explore interests, identify strengths and build confidence. Access to arts, culture and leisure activities can also support wellbeing, development and creativity[60].

Community and enrichment activities provide access to peer relationships and trusted adults outside the formal care system. Importantly, these relationships are often not mandatory. They are shaped by a child's interests, identity and wishes.

> **"I had such a big community when I first went into care. I went to clubs; I built such a big community and then I had to move again. I lost all of that. Three years on, I still haven't had a proper community."**
>
> – Care-experienced young person

We heard positive examples of clubs and youth groups providing children with a strong sense of community, belonging and connection. We also heard from children who had experienced distant or frequent moves about how painful it was to lose the relationships they had developed through these activities.

> **"I had to leave all my clubs when I moved foster carers, there was no new plan of what new clubs I might join."**
>
> – Care-experienced child

Local authorities and social workers have an important role in helping children access community and enrichment opportunities, particularly after a move to a new home, area or school. This can include identifying local clubs and groups, supporting children to take part, and providing practical or financial assistance where needed. Access to these opportunities can help children develop friendships, strengthen support networks and build meaningful connections in their local community.

Recommendation

Following a move, children's care plans should identify the clubs, groups, activities and communities that matter to them and set out how they will be maintained or replaced with opportunities that reflect the child's interests and identity.

60 Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee (2019), *Changing Lives: the social impact of participation in culture and sport*

Good practice

We heard examples of carers and professionals making an effort to understand children's culture and help them stay connected to their community. This included learning about their religion, learning how to care for their hair, helping them attend cultural events, and celebrating important holiday and dates. Some local authorities also hold cultural events where people can come together and celebrate different cultures.

Community and identity

Relationships with community can be particularly important to children from minoritised groups, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and children who share certain protected characteristics. Separation from family, schools and communities can isolate children from their cultural backgrounds, language and identity.

Children's individual experiences and views should be central when considering cultural or identity matching. For some children, a particular home or community may trigger previous harms or trauma; for others cultural matching can be an important source of safety and belonging. Decisions should therefore be child-centred rather than based on assumptions about identity.

We know that children from multicultural cities can experience moves to predominantly white regions across the country, many miles from home. This can expose children to discrimination, social isolation and disconnection from identity.

> **"I experienced racism in school and because I was moving in a few weeks, they didn't do anything saying not to make it harder."**
>
> – Care-experienced young person

A child may already have a social worker from a different background. After a move to less diverse area, they may also attend a school where they are the only child in their class or year with their background or identity. These circumstances can create additional barriers to building relationships and increase the risk of loneliness.

One young person told us that, despite having social workers from infancy throughout their time in care, they had never had a social worker who matched their ethnicity.

We heard many accounts of racism, discrimination and bullying following moves. We also heard that minoritised children did not have consistent access to their language, cultural food or religious practices, including diet, prayer and holidays. Children told us that their concerns were not always heard or taken seriously when they sought help.

It's essential that children are aware of their rights to a complaints procedure, understand how to speak up when they are not receiving appropriate care, and are meaningfully listened and responded to, if they do seek help.

Professionals and carers need the knowledge and skills to support children to maintain and build relationships with their cultural communities This includes understanding the significance of language, food, faith, customs, heritage and community, while listening to each child's individual experience.

Recommendation

The Department for Education should consider how therapeutic support can be made accessible to children who have experienced significant relational disruption, including separation from people, communities and networks that are important to their identity, culture, religion, heritage, wellbeing and sense of belonging.

Healthy relationships

Children in care need support to understand what healthy relationships looks like and to develop the confidence and skills to build them. This is particularly important where children have experienced trauma, loss or instability that has affected their trust in others.

Support should not only focus on repairing harm. Children also need opportunities to develop practical skills and confidence to form and maintain relationships for themselves.

> **"It would have been very helpful to be taught how to form healthy, stable and long-term relationships. Due to a mix of never being taught how to form healthy relationships, or even ever being modelled one, I struggled greatly with understanding socially appropriate behaviour, and out of loneliness, getting too attached to people, but instead of receiving support to manage that, social services pressed criminal charges against me."**
>
> – Care-experienced young person

Adults around them should help children recognise healthy relationships and identify unsafe or abusive dynamics, while providing consistent support as they navigate friendship, family, romantic and professional relationships.

Where a relationship is unsafe, unwanted, or causing harm, children need adults who will listen and respond appropriately.

Recommendation

The Department for Education should ensure every child in care has access to age-appropriate support to understand healthy relationships, recognise unsafe or abusive dynamics, develop confidence and build the skills they need to maintain relationships throughout childhood and adulthood.

Conclusion

The message from care-experienced children and young people is clear: our current care system must do more to protect relationships for children in care.

Through this inquiry, we can envisage a care system designed to preserve and protect relationships, ensuring that all children in care have access to loving, stable, identity-affirming, consistent connections. These relationships are the building blocks that enable children to grow and thrive.

No single relationship can provide all the support a child needs. Children value a wide range of relationships, each of which plays a unique and important role in their lives. Their voices must be heard, and the relationships that matter to them must be recognised and protected.

Unfortunately, frequent instability in care disrupts relationships for too many children. Repeated or abrupt changes in homes, carers, schools or support can disconnect children from the relationships, networks and communities that give them a sense of identity and belonging. While some change will be unavoidable, the disruption children experience too often reflects pressures within the system rather than their needs or wishes.

A different approach is possible. Through our inquiry, we have heard positive examples of how professionals, carers, local authorities and organisations have put children's relationships at the centre of practice and decision-making. We need to build and expand on this to embed a culture-change where strengthening, nurturing and empowering children's relationships is a fundamental purpose and objective of the care system. The recommendations in this report set out practical steps to help achieve that ambition.

Full recommendations

1. The Government's new metric on enduring relationships should be co-designed with care-experienced children and young people, reflect the changing nature and variety of children's important relationships, and measure how the children themselves experience and value the quality and significance of those relationships.
2. The Department for Education should fund and deliver a sustained national recruitment campaign to support the effective delivery of the national fostering strategy, alongside measures to improve foster care retention.
3. The Treasury and Department for Education should explore options to increase the availability of capital funding available to local authorities to expand in-house residential provision where this is needed, with this investment treated as strategic social infrastructure spending.
4. The Department for Education should develop, publish and implement plans, as soon as possible, to introduce accountability mechanisms and measures for Regional Care Co-operatives that assess how they are planning and delivering sufficiency.
5. The Department for Education should strengthen requirements around location assessments

as part of Ofsted's registration process to include a requirement for providers to secure written support from the local authority demonstrating local need for the provision.

6. Following changes to the Ofsted registration process, Ofsted should introduce a triaging process to address the backlog of children's homes applications, with criteria including whether planning permission has been granted and whether there is written support of local need for the provision.

7. The Department for Education should introduce a national register of local authority and independent foster carers, including foster carers who are available to foster children, which is searchable by geographical area.

8. The Ofsted inspection framework for local authority children's services should be strengthened to include clear evaluation criteria about the extent to which local authorities are delivering sufficiency

9. The Department for Education should collect and publish annual data on the number of children who are:

    a. living apart from their siblings;

    b. living in unregistered accommodation;

    c. living in care settings that do not reflect their care plan; and

    d. living more than 20 miles from home due to an absence of appropriate local homes or carers.

10. The Department for Education should review the inclusion of the "reasonably practicable" qualifier in sections 22C and 22G of the Children Act 1989 and assess whether it weakens local authorities' duties to secure placements that meet children's needs and protect their important relationships. Where necessary, the Government should bring forward legislative changes to strengthen these duties.

11. The Department for Education should establish dedicated grant funding for local authorities to develop and expand evidence-based family reunification practice, alongside strengthened national guidance on effective approaches to supporting children to return home safely and sustainably.

12. The Department for Education and local authorities should strengthen access to Independent Visitors by increasing investment, improving recruitment and awareness, and developing more flexible pathways into the role. This should include:

    a. encouraging prospective foster carers who do not complete an application to become Independent Visitors; and

    b. enabling former carers or other trusted adults with existing relationships to continue supporting children as an Independent Visitor where appropriate and in the child's best interests.

13. The Department for Education should review and update the professional standards, training frameworks and qualification requirements for children's social care professionals - including social workers, foster carers and residential care workers - to ensure they include competencies on supporting children to develop and sustain healthy, enduring relationships, alongside a core understanding of trauma, stigma, culture, religion, identity and belonging.

14. The Department for Education should amend statutory guidance on care planning and reviews to ensure that identifying, protecting, maintaining and strengthening children's important relationships becomes a consistent and accountable part of care planning and decision-making.

Revised guidance should require that:

a. Children's important relationships are identified and planned for. Care plans and reviews should identify the relationships that matter to each child and set out how important family, friendship, community and cultural connections will be protected, maintained and strengthened, with clearly assigned responsibility for putting these plans into practice.

b. Children are involved in decisions that affect their relationships. Care planning should be strengthened to ensure that, as far as possible, children are meaningfully involved in decisions that impact on their relationships. This should be monitored and assessed through Ofsted's inspection of local authority children's services.

c. Relationship disruption is anticipated and mitigated. Care planning and reviews should proactively plan for unavoidable changes and predictable points of disruption, with clear actions to protect important relationships, minimise unnecessary disruption, and ensure that any changes are carefully planned, clearly explained and emotionally supported.

d. Children have access to supportive adult relationships. Care planning should identify when a child would benefit from a mentoring, befriending, family-finding or Independent Visitor service and ensure they are connected to appropriate support to help build and maintain meaningful relationships.

e. Decision-making balances risk and relationships. Risk should be assessed holistically and proportionately, with children's relationships considered as part of decision-making and supported wherever possible, in line with their best interests.

f. Contact arrangements are relationship-focused. Contact arrangements should be child-centred, flexible and designed around natural connection, with children involved in decisions about the setting, timing and activities.

g. Children have the digital means to stay connected. Children in care should have access to age-appropriate phones, devices, connectivity and digital support to help them maintain important relationships, with appropriate safeguards in place where needed.

h. Children's social participation is promoted. Following a move, children's care plans should identify the clubs, groups, activities and communities that matter to them and set out how they will be maintained or replaced with opportunities that reflect the child's interests and identity.

15. As part of its Enduring Relationships strategy, the Department for Education should explore options for providing additional or flexible funding to local authorities to help overcome practical barriers, such as transport costs, so children can attend family visits, social activities, or maintain important relationships.

16. The Department for Education should consider how therapeutic support can be made accessible to children who have experienced significant relational disruption, including separation from people, communities and networks that are important to their identity, culture, religion, heritage, wellbeing and sense of belonging.

17. The Department for Education should ensure every child in care has access to age-appropriate support to understand healthy relationships, recognise unsafe or abusive dynamics, develop confidence and build the skills they need to maintain relationships throughout childhood and adulthood.

Methodology

The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Care-Experienced Children and Young People launched its inquiry into how the care system protects and supports children's relationships in February 2026. The inquiry was coordinated by Become, the national charity for children in care and young care leavers, which acts as the secretariat to the APPG.

The evidence from the inquiry was collected between April 2026 to June 2026.

Research questions

The Inquiry had separate evidence-gathering streams, which collectively investigated the following research questions:

- How does the care system currently protect and support children's relationships?
- What's the impact of instability on the relationships that matter most to children in care?
- What changes are needed to reduce the instability that children in care face?
- What can be done to strengthen and maintain children's connections to the people and communities that are important to them?

Evidence gathering

In total, the inquiry received evidence or heard from 226 individuals and organisations. This was done using three separate methods:

1. Sessions for care-experienced children and young people

Become conducted ten online self-selecting sessions to hear the views of care-experienced children and young people. These sessions were semi-structured interviews, covering the inquiry's terms of reference. These were held online via Zoom between April and May 2026. Seven of the sessions were attended by Parliamentary members or officers of the APPG.

There were six thematic sessions, which focused on different types of instability that children in care experience and the impact this has on how children's relationships are supported and protected. There were also four sessions with children and young people who share certain protected characteristics or experiences. A total of 47 children and young people join these sessions ranging from age 8-27.

Thematic sessions:

- Being moved schools or disrupted education
- Distance moves
- Sibling separation
- Professional relationships

- Moving home and the impact on relationships
- Separation from community - cultural, language, religious or shared identity

Intersectionality sessions:

- Care-experienced children and young people who have been subject to immigration controls
- Care-experienced children and young people from the LGBTQ+ community
- Care-experienced children and young people from ethnic minority background
- Care-experienced children and young people with a disability, or health condition

In addition to the sessions hosted by Become, other organisations working with care-experienced children and young people had the opportunity to run their own sessions using our session plan and toolkit. We had feedback to inform the inquiry's evidence from the following groups:

Coram Voice	Care to Dance	Barnardo's	Drive Forward Foundation
Settle Advocacy Group	Islington Children's Active Involvement Service	South Gloustershire TCC	Wokingham CiCC
Cumberland CiCC	Hammersmith and Fulham EP2CC	Cambridgeshire CiCC	Dudley CiCC
St Basil's Youth Voice	Bournemouth, Christchurch, Poole Youth Forum		

In total, we received evidence from 171 care-experienced children and young people between the ages of 8-27.

2. Sessions with sector professionals

We held eight thematic evidence sessions in Parliament with 25 sector professionals and experts to explore the enablers and barriers to supporting and protecting children's relationships, the causes and solutions of relational instability and examples of good practice. The sessions were facilitated by Parliamentarians, with support from Become.

Session	Organisation	Individual
Fostering sufficiency	The Fostering Network	Sarah Thomas
Fostering sufficiency	National Association of Fostering Providers	Mark Owers
Fostering sufficiency	Fairer Fostering Partnership	Andy Elvin
Fostering sufficiency	London Borough of Greenwich	Ishara Tewary
Regional Care Co-operatives	Greater Manchester Regional Co-operative	Chantel Brown
Regional Care Co-operatives	Home and Future (South East Regional Co-operative	Lucy Butler

Regional Care Co-operatives		Kathy Evans
Family reunification	NSPCC	Eavan McKay
Family reunification	Coventry City Council	Matt Clayton
Family reunification		Jonny Hoyle
Family reunification	University of Sussex	Prof Lisa Holmes
Other supportive adults	Family Rights Group	Cathy Ashley
Other supportive adults	Foundations	Donna Molloy
Other supportive adults	Barnardo's	Nicola Smith
Other supportive adults	Goal 17 Mentoring	Fran Salussolia
Supported accommodation	The Together Trust	Styliana Pasiardi
Supported accommodation	Home for Good	Tania Bright
Supported accommodation	National Association of Supported Accommodation Providers	Wendy Williams
Children's homes and unregistered accommodation	Children's Home Association	Mark Kerr
Children's homes and unregistered accommodation	London School of Economics	Dr Ben Goodair
Children's homes and unregistered accommodation	National Audit Office	Emma Willson
Children's homes and unregistered accommodation	Local Government Association	Cllr Amanda Hopgood
Oversight and accountability	Children's Commissioner	Harriet Waldegrave
Oversight and accountability	Ofsted	Matthew Brazier
Children's Minister	Minister for Children and Families	Josh MacAlister OBE MP

3. Written Evidence

We issued a call for written evidence through an online survey, inviting individuals and organisations to share their views and experiences of how the care system shapes children's relationships in England. Respondents could comment on one or more of the themes explored in our evidence sessions or share broader perspectives on the inquiry's research questions.

This survey was promoted through Become's website and social media accounts, the APPG's newsletter, and was shared with organisations or individuals who expressed their interest iin contributing to the Inquiry.

We received responses to the evidence survey from 25 individuals, including care-experienced young people and adults, professionals, academics, foster carers, parents, kinship carers and members of the public.

We also received responses from six organisations, including local authorities, public bodies, charities and research institutes.

In addition to this, five individuals or organisations shared written evidence outside of the evidence survey that was considered as part of the broader evidence to the inquiry.

To protect anonymity, respect privacy and ensure consistency, we have not named those who responded to our evidence survey, or submitted written evidence.

Evidence Coding and Analysis

All evidence submitted to the inquiry was considered equally during the coding and analysis process. We did not weight responses, and evidence from individuals was treated in the same way as submissions from organisations and public bodies. As a result, the findings and recommendations in this report are drawn from the full body of evidence we received.

While we have worked to reflect the evidence as fully as possible, we have not been able to include every view expressed. This report focuses on the main themes, experiences and recommendations that emerged across the evidence.

Acknowledgements

The APPG for Care-Experienced Children and Young People would like to extend its sincere thanks to everyone who contributed their time, expertise, experiences and insights to this inquiry. We are incredibly grateful to all those who helped shape our understanding of the issues explored and informed the inquiry's findings and recommendations. This includes:

- The care-experienced children and young people who generously shared their experiences, views and ideas through inquiry sessions and engagement activities;
- The Children in Care Councils and other groups who facilitated discussions and helped bring the voices of care-experienced young people into the inquiry;
- The individuals and organisations who attended evidence sessions in Parliament and shared their expertise;
- The individuals and organisations who responded to the inquiry survey or submitted written

evidence; and

- The Parliamentary members and officers of the APPG who participated in evidence sessions throughout the inquiry.

To protect anonymity, respect privacy and ensure consistency, we have not named all those who contributed evidence to the inquiry. Nevertheless, every contribution has been invaluable, and we are deeply grateful to all who took part. Above all, the APPG would like to thank the care-experienced children and young people whose experiences, perspectives and ideas have been at the heart of this inquiry. Their honesty, insight and commitment have shaped both our understanding and our recommendations. We hope this report reflects the importance of the issues they raised and the changes they want to see.

Finally, the APPG would like to record its thanks to Become, the national charity for children in care and young care leavers, for coordinating and delivering this inquiry in its role as Secretariat to the APPG. Particular thanks goes to Matt Blow and Clare Bracey for overseeing the inquiry, to Madeline Garrett and Simone Connolly for their research and writing, to Jo Petty, Matthew Nixon and Sarah James for overseeing the participation of care-experienced children and young people, and to the Become comms team for their support throughout, in particular Kirsten Graver for designing this report.

appg

for Care-Experienced
Children and Young People

BECOME IN CARE. LEAVING CARE. WE CARE.

Contact:
Email us at appg@becomecharity.org.uk
Find out more about the APPG for Care-Experienced Children and Young People and join our mailing list: BecomeCharity.org.uk/APPG

This report has been researched and funded by Become, which provides the secretariat to the APPG. Become is the national charity for children in care and young care leavers.

This is not an official publication of the House of Commons or the House of Lords. It has not been approved by either House or its committees. All-Party Parliamentary Groups are informal groups of Members of both Houses with a common interest in particular issues. The views expressed in this report are those of the group.