



bright spots

OUR LIVES, OUR CARE Wales 2018

**Looked after children's
views on their well-being**

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coram
Voice 
getting young voices heard



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Forewords

Improving outcomes and life chances for care experienced children is a priority of mine and a key commitment set out in our Programme for Government, 'Taking Wales Forward' and the national strategy, 'Prosperity for All'.

I am really pleased that this survey '*Our Lives, Our Care*' has been enthusiastically supported as part of my Improving Outcomes for Children Ministerial Advisory Group's work.

Recognising and listening to the voice of the child and being responsive to their views and experiences is fundamental to our work and of course embedded as principles of the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014.

The pilot survey was conducted to help local authorities, as corporate parents, to better understand what matters most to the children they are looking after and their thoughts and feelings about the care they receive. Each local authority involved in the survey has received a report tailored to their organisation. I call on local authorities to use the information wisely so it can influence how services are developed and delivered to meet children and young people's needs and expectations.

This national report brings together the results across the six local authorities involved in the pilot. There are areas where we are doing well but also others where we can do better. We must now learn from what children and young people are saying matters to them most - in their relationships with their carers, families and friends, how they are supported and the opportunities they are given to flourish.

I encourage all stakeholders with an interest in looked after children to read this report. My Ministerial Advisory Group will consider its findings and what action is taken next.

I would like to extend my thanks to the Children's Commissioner for Wales, local authorities, Coram Voice, and the University of Bristol for their work in successfully delivering the survey. Most importantly, my thanks and warm appreciation go to the children and young people who have so kindly given their time to participate in this survey.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be 'Huw Irranca-Davies', written over a horizontal line.

Huw Irranca-Davies AM

Minister for Children, Older People and Social Care

'I would like to see my little brother', 'I've had a better life because I came into foster care', , 'I was moved round so much that I couldn't trust anyone', 'The police treated me better because I was in care', 'I knew that my foster carers loved me', 'I refuse to speak to my social worker. The one before was better'.

These are snippets from conversations I've had as Children's Commissioner with young people who are looked after in foster, residential or kinship care. Face-to-face listening is very important, but a survey does something different. It gives children and young people the chance to give anonymous, honest feedback and the opportunity for those in charge of providing care to find out how widespread views and experiences are amongst those in their care. They can then pinpoint exactly what areas they need to work on to improve experiences.

Conducted as part of the Welsh Government's Ministerial Advisory Group work plan on Improving Outcomes for Children, *Our Lives, Our Care* is an evidence-based survey that has been developed by and for care experienced children. The questions focus on children's rights and well-being, and it is the first time such a survey has been conducted in Wales.

I championed this survey being undertaken here in Wales to make sure that 'bright spots' of practice can be highlighted and celebrated, and that the concerns of care experienced children here in Wales can be heard and, more importantly, addressed. Moreover, the views and experiences of children aged 16 and under are not routinely gathered and used for policy development, but this particular survey has allowed children from the age of 4 upwards to have their say on their care and well-being.

As a first, this survey was piloted in six different local authorities from all across Wales. Just over a third of the children in care in these six areas participated in the survey on average, which is similar to the proportion that took part in the pilot in England.

Findings from this initial survey – which can be compared against results from England and to the general population - are mixed. I'm pleased to hear that the vast majority of children feel safe in their placement, although of course I want every child to enjoy their right to feel safe. A common theme was children and young people not always understanding their situation and how they've come to be in care. This highlights the importance of ongoing life journey work with all children separated from their families.

Well-being is a key part of this work, and lower well-being was associated with young people not knowing the reasons for being in care. It is worrying that girls aged 11-18 were twice as likely to have low well-being compared to boys, and many had experienced bullying. There is a role for social workers and schools to work together in tackling this.

One quarter of young people aged 11-18 had had three or more social workers in the previous twelve months. The report also features strong messages about contact with wider family members and the need to regularly review contact plans. These are both concerns that I have heard directly from care experienced children.

Each local authority that took part has already received an individual report related to the children in their care, and they have each held a review meeting to discuss how

the feedback can be acted upon in their area. They will inform the children in their area what actions they will be taking.

The report also forms the beginning of a baseline of data that will show progress and successes of the work of the Welsh Government's Ministerial Advisory Group. Repeating this survey again in the future will allow more young people to have their say on their care experiences and should show any progress that has been made against the findings of this pilot.

I have been pleased to work in partnership with the Welsh Government, local authorities, Coram Voice and the University of Bristol on this project. My sincerest thanks are extended to all of the children and young people, whose views will directly contribute to service improvements for them and their peers right across Wales. I look forward to seeing the concrete changes and actions that come from this important piece of work, reflecting what each local authority as the corporate parent will take forward for their own children in their care.

Sally Holland

Children's Commissioner for Wales

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Acknowledgements

To deliver a successful survey demands an active partnership between many different organisations.

First our thanks must go to the willingness of the pilot local authorities (Caerphilly, Cardiff, Flintshire, Pembrokeshire, Rhondda Cynon Taff and Swansea) to engage with the process of distributing and conducting a survey of their looked after children. Each local authority's working group was committed to reaching all their looked after children, wherever they might be living. We have been delighted to see their response to children's views and the changes made to policy and practice.

And of course, a huge thank you to all the children and young people who took the time to complete the survey.

Further information

For information about the Bright Spots Programme and participating in the surveys contact Coram Voice brightspots@coramvoice.org.uk

For more information on the analysis of the survey data contact Professor Julie Selwyn j.selwyn@bristol.ac.uk.

Introduction

In 2018, six Welsh local authorities (Caerphilly, Cardiff, Flintshire, Pembrokeshire, Rhondda Cynon Taff and Swansea) agreed to pilot the ‘Your Life, Your Care’ surveys with looked after children and young people aged between 4 years and 18 years. The surveys were designed with children and young people in care to collect information on how looked after children felt and thought about their well-being (subjective well-being), based on the things that were important to them. The Welsh pilot was intended to assess the survey’s relevance and usefulness for local authorities in their efforts to improve outcomes for the children in their care. This report sets out the background to the pilot in Wales, the original development of the surveys, the response of children and young people in Wales to the questions and summarises the findings.

Background

The government in Wales has set ambitious long-term goals to develop thriving, resilient, more equal communities where children and young people reach their full potential (Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act, 2015). Improving the community’s well-being is seen an essential step in reaching those goals, and there has been a raft of policy initiatives and legislation to support and improve well-being. The well-being definition is set out in a published statement that contains seven overall goals with 46 indicators and an outcome-based approach to measuring national progress.¹

Many of the outcomes are collected nationally using data from the National Survey for Wales² but only those over 16 years of age are surveyed. The Children and Young People’s Monitor for Wales (2015) highlighted the limited information available on specific topics such as safety at home, and a dearth of national information on children’s own views and experiences. Knowing how children feel, think and experience their lives is crucial to understanding well-being.

More recently attention has been paid to the well-being of looked after children in Wales³ with the implementation of The Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act, which came into force on 6th April 2016. The Act requires local authorities⁴ to promote the well-being of children and adults who need support. The Act builds on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and requires local authorities to have conversations with children about things that matter to them.

¹ <https://gov.wales/docs/statistics/2018/180326-well-being-wales-2016-17-seven-goals-en.pdf>

² <https://gov.wales/docs/dhss/publications/160610frameworken.pdf>

³ <https://gov.wales/docs/dhss/publications/150716craen.pdf>

⁴ <https://gov.wales/docs/dhss/publications/151103outcomesinfographicen.pdf>

There are seven key areas of well-being⁵ that were co-produced with children and the areas are:

- 1) Ensuring rights are upheld (e.g. involved in decision-making, listened to, treated with respect)
- 2) Physical, mental and emotionally healthy (e.g. feelings about happiness)
- 3) Protected from maltreatment (e.g. feeling safe)
- 4) Getting an education and having time for sports and play;
- 5) Positive relationships with family and with friends (e.g. belonging, safe and healthy relationships).
- 6) Involvement in the community (e.g. feeling valued) and
- 7) Having a good social life (e.g. doing things that matter to the child).

A code of practice⁶ sets out a framework for measuring the progress that local authorities make against the duties under the Act as a whole. Each local authority must have arrangements in place to collect the data on the statutory performance measures detailed in the code of practice. In addition, the framework introduced a new set of qualitative performance measures for local authority social services, which involves asking different user groups (adults, carers, parents, and children aged 7-17yrs) a similar set of survey questions about how they feel in respect of each of the key areas. The new survey for children (7-17yrs) was first used in 2016-2017. The Your Life, Your Care surveys are complementary of this wider work and collect more specific data on looked after children's subjective well-being, based on the things that are important to them.

Piloting 'Your Life, Your Care' surveys in Wales

The 'Your Life, Your Care' surveys were co-produced with 140 looked after children and young people in England aged 6-18 years old. A full account of their development is available⁷, but in brief their development was underpinned by a children's rights perspective and influenced by Seligman's work on flourishing⁸ and a belief that children should be enabled to flourish in care. Looked after children and young people identified four key areas that were important to them (rights, relationships, resilience and recovery) each containing different indicators (Figure 1).

⁵ <https://gov.wales/docs/dhss/publications/160905wellbeing-childrenen.pdf>

⁶ <https://gov.wales/docs/dhss/publications/160401codeen.pdf>

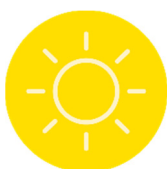
⁷ Selwyn J., Wood, M. and Newman T. (2015). Looked after Children and Young People in England: developing measures of subjective well-being. *Child Indicators Research*. 10, 363-380. Wood, M. & Selwyn, J. (2017). Looked after children and young people's views on what matters to their subjective well-being. *Adoption and Fostering*. 41, 20-34.

⁸ Seligman, M.E.P. (2011). *Flourish: a visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being*. New York. Free Press.

Figure 1:
Bright Spots
Well-being
Indicators



Figure 2:
Relationship
between the
Bright Spots
well-being
indicators
and the
seven Well-
being Goals



Well-being means

The 'Your Life Your Care' survey measures whether children and young people in care:

...making sure that you have your rights

- Feel included in social workers decisions
- Think an adult has explained to them why they are in care
- Get to do the same things as their peers
- Know that they can speak to their social worker alone
- Know who their social worker is
- Have social workers who do not change
- Find it easy to contact their social workers

...being physically, mentally and emotionally healthy

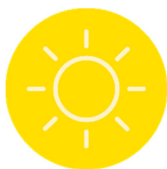
- Were happy yesterday
- Are satisfied with life as a whole
- Feel the things that they do are worthwhile
- Are positive about the future
- Feel that life is getting better
- Do not worry about their feelings and behaviour or are supported if they worry
- Are happy with the way they look

... having positive relationships at home and with my family and friends

- Have a trusted adult in their lives
- Trust the people they live with
- Feel that adults they live with notice how they are feeling
- Trust their social workers
- Are happy with how often they get to see their birth family
- Have a good friend
- Have a pet

... having an education, training, sports and play.

- Like school
- Have carers that take an interest in their education
- Get to have fun at weekends or do their own hobbies and activities
- Have access to the outdoors (woods, parks, beaches etc.)



Well-being means

The 'Your Life Your Care' survey measures whether children and young people in care:

... being protected from abuse, harm and neglect

- Feel safe at home
- Are not afraid to go to school because of bullying
- Are supported with bullying
- Not made to feel different.

... being able to get involved and be part of my community.

- Get chances to be trusted or help out in school
- Get second chances

... having a healthy social life and enough money to live a healthy life.

- Get to do similar things to their friends
- Get to practice life skills (cooking, washing, budgeting)
- Have access to the internet at home

... having a good, healthy place to live.

- Feel settled where they live
- Like their bedrooms

Comparison to the general population

Comparisons can only be made with the responses of children in the general population older than 8 years of age (Box 1). No data are collected on young children's views.

Box 1. UK surveys containing information on children's well-being

The Children's Society 'Good Childhood Report' The Children's Society has been running an online well-being survey since July 2010. Each wave has so far covered a representative sample of approximately 2,000 households, in England Scotland and Wales. The survey includes quota sampling for age, gender and family socio-economic status. Waves 1 to 9 included children aged 8 to 15, while Wave 10 included children aged 10 to 17. Each wave of the survey has included a standard set of questions that make up *The Good Childhood Index* together with questions covering additional topics which have varied for each wave.

(<https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/the-good-childhood-report-2017>)

The Children and Young People's Wellbeing Monitor for Wales 2015 is a government social research publication collating information on children's well-being. The Monitor is one of the initiatives the government took to fulfil its commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

(<https://gov.wales/statistics-and-research/children-young-peoples-wellbeing-monitor-wales/?lang=en>)

Office of National Statistics (ONS) The ONS collates evidence annually from government surveys and The Children's Society and Understanding Society surveys on 7 measures: personal well-being, our relationships, health, what we do, where we live, personal finance, and education and skills.

(<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/datasets/childrenswellbeingmeasures>)

The Health Behaviour of School-aged Children study (HBSC) The HBSC collects data every four years on children aged 11yrs, 13yrs, and 15yrs. Information is collected on health and well-being, social environments and health behaviours. In Wales, the sample size was 9,055 in 2013/14.

(<http://www.hbsc.org/>)

The Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) The MCS is a survey following the lives of around 19,000 children born in the UK in 2000/2001. (www.cls.ioe.ac.uk)

National Survey for Wales – outdoor recreation, 2015. Each year, a representative sample of over 10,000 people across Wales take part face-to-face in the National Survey. The results are used by the Welsh Government and sponsored bodies to help make Wales a better place to live. It includes people aged 16 years or older who live in both the countryside and in towns.

(<https://naturalresources.wales/evidence-and-data/research-and-reports/national-survey-for-wales/?lang=en>)

Children's Worlds survey is an international survey of children's well-being. The survey aims to collect representative data on children's lives and daily activities, their time use and on how they feel about and evaluate specific aspects of their lives. The UK survey covered a representative sample of over 3,000 children in school years 4, 6 and 8. An additional sample (provided by The Children's Society) of around 1,000 children in Year 10 completed the survey in 2014.

(www.isciweb.org)

Our Lives, Our care: Looked after children's views on their well-being in 2017 (February 2018) details all the findings from children and young people who completed the Bright Spots *Your Life, Your Care* survey in England in 2017 (2,263 children and young people from 16 local authorities). (www.coramvoice.org.uk/brightspots)

Survey distribution

In 2018, the surveys were distributed by 6 Welsh local authorities to their looked after children and young people. The Bright Spots team worked with each pilot local authority to establish the most effective approach to distribution in their area. The questionnaires were completed mainly online, with paper copies for those who preferred. Depending on the local authority's preference and the child's age and capacity, surveys were completed privately in school with a trusted adult, or with the support of a personal advisor. Some children completed the survey before a review meeting with the independent reviewing officer. Data collection was also complemented by business support staff supporting young people to complete the survey, and copies of the survey being available in local authority offices where young people visited.

Relevance

All surveys need to be relevant and these surveys needed to be relevant to looked after children and to the local authority. The survey questions were designed with and by children and young people in England, were piloted with them and refined. Most of the text responses from children and young people in Wales confirmed that the questions were relevant. Some children simply wrote "*Thank you*" in the final comment box. However, a few young people objected to the survey describing it as "*boring*". There were also a few responses from young people under 18 years of age who were living on their own and felt that some of the questions were irrelevant or inappropriate.

Since the development of this pilot the Bright Spots team has finalised a survey for care leavers aged 16-25, using the same rigorous methodology of drawing on research and working with young people to develop the questionnaire. For older young people, living independently under the age of 18yrs, the 'Your Life Beyond Care' survey designed for care leavers would be more appropriate.

Two adults helping children aged 8-11yrs to complete the survey commented that the questions on contact were not understood by the child, as they were not having contact and were waiting for life story work to start.

Young people seemed to like the anonymity of the survey. One young man compared it favourably to a previous survey they had to complete with their foster carer present that had asked very personal questions about their sexual development.

Timeliness of returning results

It is important that children and local authorities receive timely results so that children feel their voice has been heard and local authorities can plan, using up-to-date results. To achieve a timely response, the surveys were analysed and detailed reports given to the local authority within three months of the survey closing.

The reports were followed up by a dissemination meeting with the local authority planning group, who had been responsible for promoting and distributing the survey, or wider groups of professionals and managers. At these meetings the Bright Spots team presented and facilitated a discussion around the findings to help inform the development of a response. In total 88 professionals attended these sessions across the 6 pilot areas.

In addition, one local authority pulled together a group of 8 children and young people who were also given the opportunity to discuss the findings. Each local authority received a set of summaries of the key findings for children and young people – these presented children’s view “you said” and included space for the local authority to set out what they were doing in response “we will” (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Example of summary of findings for children and young people

coram Voice **University of BRISTOL** **Your Life, Your Care: 4-7 year olds survey findings**

We asked you some questions about what life is like for you. We asked lots of children in care the same questions. This is what you all told us and what we want to do.

YOU SAID

What was good?

- Nearly all of you liked school.
- All of you felt safe where you live.
- All of you said you got to have fun on the weekends.
- All of you said your carers noticed your feelings.

What was bad?

- Some of you said you would like to see your birth family more.
- Some of you did not know who your social worker is.
- Many of you thought no one had explained why you were in care.

WE WILL

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Space for local authority logo

Thank you to all of you who answered the questions. It really helped to read about how you feel. Because of what you told us Cardiff have decided to make some changes.

The survey was created together with children in care to ask about the things that was important to them. Coram Voice and University of Bristol have done the same survey in other local authorities and will bring together your responses to show what care is like for children across the country. If you want to find out more email: brightspots@coramvoice.org.uk

The following chapters set out the findings of the 2018 surveys beginning with information on the children and young people’s demographics.

Demographics

Six Welsh local authorities (LAs) piloted the 'Your Life, Your Care' surveys in 2018. They were completed by 686 children and young people: approximately 28% of all looked after children in Wales aged between 4 and 18 years old.

Most surveys were completed in English and a minority (9) completed in Welsh. All the questions were *optional* to allow children to make their own decisions about which questions they answered and therefore the number of responses differ by question. The average survey return rate was 35%, with individual LA return rates varying between 21% and 44%. The children's ages (Table 1) reflect the proportions in the national looked after population where 53% are 10-18yrs⁹. Girls (49%) were slightly over-represented in the survey responses, as they make up 46% of the Welsh care population.

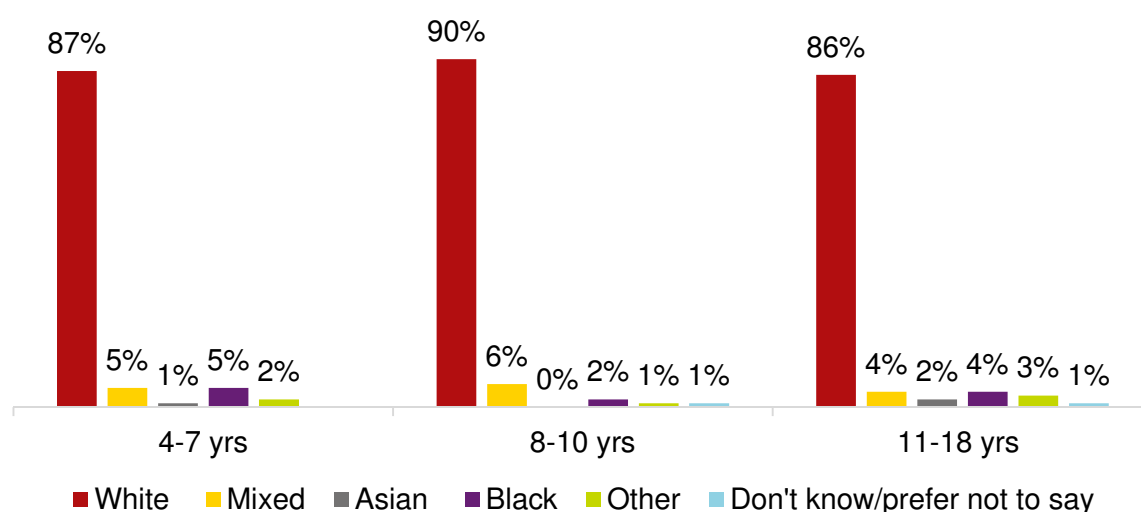
Table 1: The gender and age of children and young people completing the survey (n=686)

Age group	Boys	Girls	Prefer not to say	Total
11-18yrs	183	186	9	378 (55%)
8-10yrs	101	83	2	186 (27%)
4-7yrs	53	67	2	122 (18%)
Total	337 (49%)	336 (49%)	13 (2%)	686 (100%)

The majority (87%) of children and young people who completed the survey described themselves as white. Minority ethnic children were over-represented: 12% of the sample described themselves as being of minority ethnicity in comparison with 8% of the national care population⁹. It was interesting to note that the published administrative data from some of the Welsh local authorities⁹ showed no children of minority ethnicity being looked after, but children and young people's responses did not concur. For example, in one LA, 17% of children and young people described themselves as being of minority ethnicity when the LA statistical return showed none.

⁹ <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Health-and-Social-Care/Social-Services/Childrens-Services/Children-Looked-After/childrenlookedafterat31march-by-localauthority-gender-age>

Figure 4: The ethnicity of children and young people



Current placement

The majority (62%) of children and young people were living in foster care, 24% were in kinship care or living with parents, 9% were in residential care and 5% were living elsewhere e.g. in independent living.¹⁰

Length of time in care and number of placements

Young people (11-18yrs) were asked how long they had been in care and the number of placements they had experienced (Figure 5). Some young people responded that they did not know the length of time they had been in care (6%) or the number of placements (8%) they had experienced. Ten percent were new entrants and had been looked after for less than a year, 29% had been looked after between 1 and 3 years, whilst 55% had been in care for three years or more.

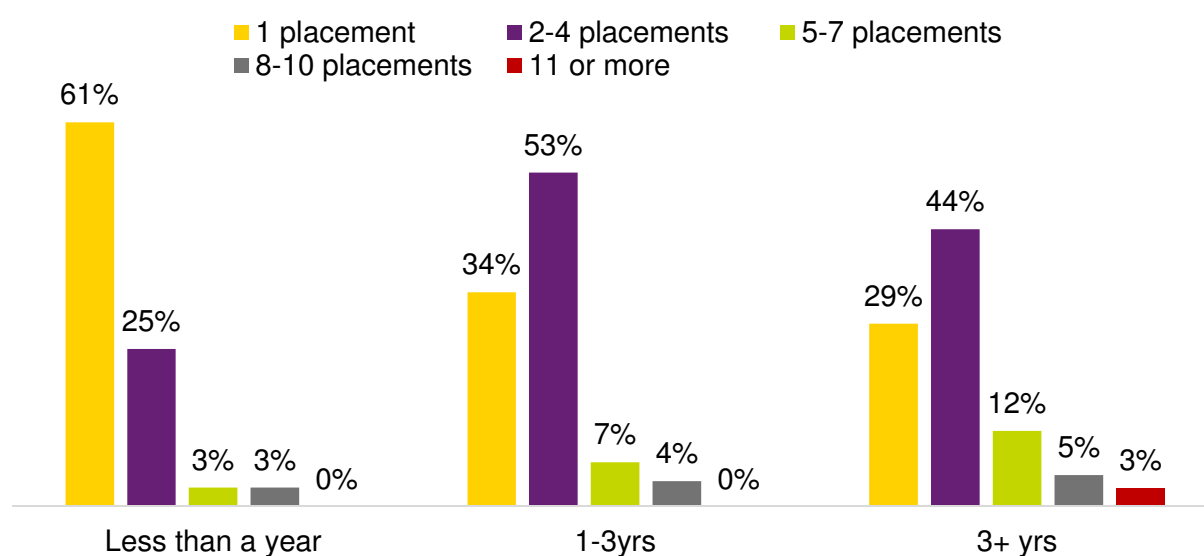
The 'Improving Outcomes for Children' ministerial advisory group¹¹ has emphasised the link between stable placements and better educational outcomes and efforts have been made to improve placement stability. In this survey, 29% of those who had been looked after for 3 years or more had only had one placement, which is a similar response to that given by looked after children in England. Our measure of

¹⁰ We are not able to directly compare the children's types of placements with the national statistics, as we did not expect children to know whether their kinship carer was a formal or informal foster carer. The national figures show that 74% of looked after children were in foster care (including kinship foster care), 12% with parents and 5% in residential (StatsWales, 2017).

¹¹ <https://gov.wales/topics/people-and-communities/people/children-and-young-people/improving-outcomes-children-ministerial-group/?lang=en>

stability is different to that published by the Welsh government which reports that 10% of looked after children had three or more placements within a year.¹²

Figure 5: Length of time in care by number of placements for young people aged 11-18yrs (n=375)



Overall, the sample was broadly representative of the looked after population by age, gender, and placement with minority ethnic children over-represented.

We will now turn to how children and young people responded to questions on their relationships.

¹² <https://gov.wales/docs/statistics/2017/171214-children-looked-after-local-authorities-2016-17-en.pdf>

Relationships

- 71% of young people (11-18yrs) trusted their carer 'all or some of the time' and only 7% did not trust at all.
- 96% of children (4-10yrs) trusted their carer and only 4% did not

Relationship with carers

All the children and young people were asked whether they trusted their carers.

Some children and young people wrote additional text comments about feeling they belonged in their foster family, felt they were treated the same as the foster carer's own children and had good food. A small number requested a change of placement but most of the comments were in praise of their carers. Children and young people wrote:

They treat me as their own child, spoil me to bits. They are overall the best foster parents I could ask for. 11-18yrs

I am very grateful and extremely lucky to have loving and caring foster carers who have made me feel part of the family. 11-18yrs

I love being in care because the people I live with are very nice and love me very much. 8-10yrs

It's good. I like [female carer's] cooking. 4-7yrs

My foster carers are nice to me and make me happy. 4-7yrs

Although 93% young people recorded that they trusted their carers, when asked how often they talked to their carers about things that mattered 61% recorded regularly (more than once a week), 15% less than once a week and 24% hardly ever. A similar proportion (65%) of young people (10-15yrs) growing up in Wales talked regularly to a parent.¹³

Unlike the child population where girls are more likely to talk to a parent, looked after boys were just as likely to talk to their carers as girls.

Relationship with social workers

Young people (11-18yrs) were asked how many social workers they had had in the previous twelve months. Younger children were not asked, because of concerns about their ability to recall the information accurately.

A quarter of the young people had three or more social workers in the past year.

- 25% of young people (11-18yrs) had had three or more social workers in the previous year
- 38% had two workers
- 36% had one social worker
- 1% had not had a social worker at all

Everyone was asked if they knew who their current social worker was and if they trusted their worker (Table 2). Most knew and trusted their social worker.

I feel that I am getting on really well with my social worker and I know I can trust her. She understands my views and feelings and I can tell her everything.
11-18yrs

But about one in four (26%) of the youngest children were unsure who their worker was. It is important to highlight young children's lack of understanding and the confusion that might bring.

Table 2: Young people and children's awareness of their present social worker and trust in worker

	11-18yrs	8-10yrs	4-7yrs
Knows who their social worker is	94%	94%	74%
Trusts their social worker 'all or most of the time' or sometimes	84%	73%	95%

One child wrote:

If I knew why I had a social worker I would understand more. **4-7yrs**

It was not surprising to find a statistically significant association with having had three or more social workers and young people expressing a lack of trust in their worker.¹⁴ The findings on children and young people's relationship with their social workers replicates the results in England. Young people wrote about their dislike of the frequent changes of social worker:

¹⁴ $\chi^2(1, n=311) = 5.822, p=.016, \Phi=.137$

Social workers shouldn't abandon the young person and move around jobs. I don't like having to meet new people/workers all the time. 11-18yrs

It's rubbish getting moved all the time, meeting new people, moving to a new area, having new social workers. 11-18yrs

Pets

In Wales, 66% of households with a child (under 19 years of age) own a pet.¹⁵ Children and young people who worked on the development of the survey questions emphasised the importance of pets in their lives. They described them as non-judgemental and, no matter what had happened, pets were always pleased to see them. Research supports the importance of pets finding that the presence of pets can reduce stress (Sobo *et al.*, 2006) and encourage more pro-social behaviour and the development of empathy (McCardle *et al.*, 2011).

Most looked after children and young people reported living in a household with pets (Table 3). In comparison with England, a similar proportion of children aged 8-10yrs lived with a pet but a larger proportion of young people (11-18yrs) had the opportunity to have a pet in their placement: 66% in Wales compared to 59% in England.

Table 3: The presence of pets in placements

	Yes	No, but I'd like one	No, and I don't want one	I'm not allowed a pet where I live
11-18yrs (n=372)	246 (66%)	66 (18%)	42 (11%)	18 (5%)
8-10yrs (n= 186)	130 (70%)	37 (20%)	14 (7%)	5 (3%)

In text responses, children and young people wrote that they wished for a pet or, when writing about contact, included pets left behind with their families as those they wished to see more of. In response to a question asking, 'What would make care better?' a few children and young people wrote:

¹⁵ <https://gov.wales/docs/statistics/2017/170119-national-survey-wales-2014-15-pet-welfare-en.pdf>

Having a pet to talk to and play with. 11-18yrs

I'd like to have access to my dog and see him. 11-18yrs

*I'd like to have a pet. I believe that would improve my mental well-being.
11-18yrs*

Would like a puppy just for me because I am the only boy in my family. 4-7yrs

Contact with family members

Young people and children (11-18yrs and 8-10yrs) were asked whether they were content with the frequency of contact that was taking place with their mother, father and siblings (Table 4).

Table 4: Satisfaction with the frequency of contact with family members

Child's age	Family member	Too much	Just right	Too Little	Can't or don't want to see
11-18yrs	Mother (n=357)	18 (5%)	151 (42%)	98 (28%)	90 (25%)
	Father (n=353)	5 (1%)	97 (28%)	73 (21%)	178 (50%)
	Siblings ² (n=346)	28 (8%)	165 (48%)	115 (33%)	38 (11%)
8-10yrs	Mother (n=181)	6 (3%)	91 (50%)	45 (25%)	39 (22%)
	Father (n=172)	4 (2%)	48 (28%)	38 (22%)	82 (48%)
	Siblings ¹⁶ (n=162)	24 (15%)	80 (49%)	42 (26%)	16 (10%)

Some young people took the opportunity to reflect on their removal from home and wished that greater efforts had been made to keep the family together. They wrote:

Well, it's sad because we've been taken off my dad ... and he's tried really hard to look after us ... We are trying to really hard to be good (with carers) so we can go back and live with dad. 11-18yrs

I know you think I am safer but I also more lonely without my family, even though my carers are great. 11-18yrs

¹⁶ 13 young people (11-18yrs) and 12 children (8-10yrs) had no siblings

I feel my social worker is not making enough effort with my family. 11-18yrs

The youngest children (4-7yrs) were not asked questions about birth family contact, as it was thought that children might become distressed or anxious. However, some gave comments about contact when asked if they wanted to make any additional comments. Many of the youngest children wrote that they missed their mothers and wanted to see more of family members. One child wanted less contact with her mother. Children commented:

I like to have contact with my 2 brothers and 1 sister. I don't like it when contact is cancelled because the taxi don't come. 4-7yrs

I would like to see my Mammy more. 4-7yrs

I want to know when I can see my mummy. 4-7yrs

One person in my family was not very nice to me. 4-7yrs

No contact

Nearly one in five (19%) young people (11-18yrs) and 15% children (8-10yrs) had no contact with either parent.

Some children and young people provided text explaining why contact was not occurring. The majority emphasised that it was their choice, for example writing:

I have chosen not to associate myself with my birth family, for my own safety and protection and the emotional damage I have felt from them. However, as I grow older I begin to understand that I cannot change the past, and someday I may feel comfortable enough to visit them. 11-18yrs

Don't want to see Dad because I don't like him. 8-10yrs

I do not want to see my mother ever again ... I am happy in care because I do not get beaten. 8-10yrs

Some comments were from young people who felt that their parents were disinterested or, in a small number of responses, stated that contact was prohibited. Children and young people wrote:

I don't have contact but that's because they (parents) don't want it. 11-18yrs

I have never seen my dad. He did have a choice to have us, but he didn't want to. 8-10yrs

I really want to see my mum and dad in contact. I can't see them because my dad is not trusted and my mum is not feeling very well. 8-10yrs

There were comments from children who did not understand why contact was not happening, wanted information on relatives or were waiting for decisions to be made. Young people and children wrote:

(Carers) are waiting to hear from the social worker but can't get an answer.

11-18yrs

I wish I could know more about my mother. 11-18yrs

Not sure if I have brothers or sisters. 11-18yrs

When I was little my dad went into the army and I don't know if he is still alive. 11-18yrs

I cannot see my father, I would like to know why and who he is. 8-10yrs

Frequency of contact with parents

About a quarter of children and young people wanted **more frequent contact** with a parent.

I only saw them once last year and I was supposed to get extra time added but this hasn't happened. 11-18yrs

I have contact with my mum and sisters once per month and that is too little for me. Also I have a 4 year old sister and that is worse for her. 11-18yrs

I want to see my mum and all my family. Please more. 11-18yrs

I feel sad that I don't see my Mam more often. 8-10yrs

Children and young people wrote about wanting more contact with specific relatives and for their contact plans to differentiate between family members. Young people wrote:

I think I should have more contact with my older brother, my nan and my aunty and less with my mum. 11-18yrs

I would like to see more of my family not just mum and dad and my nan. 8-10yrs

A few young people and children (about 5%) recorded that they were having **too much parental contact** and wrote.

I want to see my mum less. 8-10yrs

In my opinion I think I should see less of my dad. 8-10yrs

I don't like contact with my mam as she winds me up. I want to see daddy and... auntie. I feel sad. 8-10yrs

Quality of contact with parents

Some children and young people wanted the quality of contact to improve. They wrote about their concerns that their parents could not keep to the arrangements and let them down.

Mum doesn't show up so contact is suspended. 11-18yrs

Mum: she never turns up in the meetings. 8-10yrs

Don't like being let down. 8-10yrs

A few children and young people wrote about how much they enjoyed contact:

Contact is great. 11-18yrs

I feel like it's the best day ever when I see my mother because I love seeing her. I'm very sad about not seeing my dad as I really miss him - he was very nice. 8-10yrs

I like seeing my mammy in contact because she brings me food like chicken nuggets and burger king. 8-10yrs

Arrangements and environment for parental contact

Young people and children complained that contact centres were sparse and boring with little to do. Children also wanted more privacy and to spend time alone with their parents. They wrote:

Every contact centre, where you see your family, never has toys or games for older children, like 11yrs or over. When we go to contact we're not allowed to use technology, but I don't see why. We should be able to use our iPhones or iPads as otherwise we are really bored. 11-18yrs

I would like to have contact in different places instead of the same place all the time. The place we go to is boring and there is not much to do. 8-10yrs

Why does my contact have to be supervised and watch us? They type on the computer when they are in the room. 8-10yrs

I like contact, but I don't see my Mum enough. Contact is better now that we are not meeting Mum in a Contact Centre. We now do activities. 8-10yrs

Contact with siblings

A third of young people (11-18yrs) felt they had too little contact with their siblings. The majority of text comments from young people were about wanting **more contact** with their brothers and sisters.

Some wrote about how they no longer had contact as siblings had been adopted or contact was limited as a sibling was in residential care:

I find it unfair that I can't see my biological brother and sister until they are 18 because they were adopted. 11-18yrs

My brother is in full time residential care and I would like to see him more. 11-18yrs

Others wrote about being separated from their youngest sibling and siblings been placed many miles away.

Should have contact with my little brother. Even just a phone call. 11-18yrs

I would like to see my sisters more often. They don't live locally. 11-18yrs

I see my sister load not really my brothers because they live so far away. 11-18yrs

I do not really want to see my mum that much. I really would like to see my siblings. 11-18yrs

I would really like to see my sister, but she lives in (UK country). I worry that I haven't seen her in a very long time. I haven't seen her since I went into foster care about 4 years ago. 11-18yrs

A few children wrote about how pleased they were to be in the same placement as their siblings:

"I live with my brother and sister. I am happy living with them." 8-10yrs

15% of the younger children (8-10yrs) recorded that they had **too much** contact with siblings: a similar proportion as reported by that age group in England.

We do not know why the younger children felt this way but wondered if it was because they were placed together and their sibling relationships were conflictual with many negative interactions.

Friendships

Friendships are important for all children and the capacity to make and sustain friendships is protective. Friendships provide a source of comfort and support. A lack of friendships in childhood and adolescence is associated with loneliness, social isolations, anxiety and a myriad of adverse physical, psychological, social and mental health outcomes.¹⁷ However, maltreated children often struggle to make and maintain friendships, as they often demonstrate fewer pro-social behaviours and have lower self-esteem.¹⁸

In our survey, most of the children and young people stated that they had at least one good friend

Rydw i'n hapus gyda llawer o ffrindiau. I'm happy with many friends. 4-7yrs

44 (7%) of all the children and young people did not have a good friend (Table 5). Nearly one in ten adolescents (11-18yrs) lacked a good friend - far more than the general population comparison where 3% of 14yr olds report not having a good friend (Millennium Cohort Study, 2015). Looked after children in England also reported a similar lack of friends.

Table 5: Having a good friend

Age group	Has at least one good friend	Does not have one good friend
11-18yrs	313 (90.5%)	33 (9.5%)
8-10yrs	166 (95%)	9 (5%)
4-7yrs	110 (96%)	5 (4%)

¹⁷ Criss, M.M., Pettit, G.S., Bates, J.E., Dodge, K.A., & Lapp, A.L. (2002). Family adversity, positive peer relationships, and children's externalising behaviour: A longitudinal perspective on risk and resilience. *Child Development*, 73, 1220-1237. Hawkley, L.C., & Cacioppo, J.T. (2010). Loneliness matters: a theoretical and empirical review of consequences and mechanisms. *Ann Behav Med* 40, 218-227.

¹⁸ Maguire, S. A., Williams, B., Naughton, A. M., Cowley, L. E., Tempest, V., Mann, M. K., Teague, M., & Kemp, A. M. (2015). A systematic review of the emotional, behavioural and cognitive features exhibited by school-aged children experiencing neglect or emotional abuse. *Child Care Health Dev*, 41, 641-653.

Young people wrote about difficulties with friendships caused by moves, not attending school or by what they perceived as restrictive and unnecessary rules, writing:

It's difficult to tell your friends about your life. 11-18yrs

Give me more independence with friends. 11-18yrs

Being in a proper school with children in it, so I am not lonely. 8-10yrs

Good and supportive relationships are central to well-being and in the next section we will consider how children thought those relationships supported and built their resilience.

Building resilience

Having a reliable trusted adult

Research on resilience has consistently demonstrated that having a trusting relationship with one key adult is strongly associated with healthy development and recovery after experiencing adversity.¹⁹ The availability of one key adult has been shown to be the turning point in many looked after young people's lives.²⁰ Children and young people (8-10yrs and 11-18yrs) were asked, '*Do you have an adult who you trust, who helps you and sticks by you no matter what?*'

There is little comparative data, as most children in the general population usually rely on their parents. A survey of older young people (16-24yrs) in England²¹ found that only 2% had no family, friend or spouse to rely on.

89% young people (11-18yrs) and 99% children (8-10yrs) reported they had a trusted adult in their lives.

Most children and young people growing up, have someone to rely on but for looked after young people about one in ten did not have a trusted adult in their lives. The results from Welsh looked after children were very similar to their counterparts in England. Some young people in Wales reflected on what that might mean for their future:

I'm different from other people who have real families ... people who are always going to be there for them until they are much older. 11-18yrs

It also upsets me that I may not have anyone outside the care system to help me with financial problems (if I have them). 11-18yrs

Having fun: taking part in activities and hobbies

The Welsh Government defines play as: 'children's behaviour which is freely chosen personally directed and intrinsically motivated. It is performed for no external goal or reward, and is a fundamental and integral part of healthy development – not only for individual children,

¹⁹ Masten A. (2014) Ordinary Magic: Resilience in Development, Guildford Press.

²⁰ Gilligan R. (2009) *Promoting resilience*. London BAAF

²¹

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/datasets/youngpeopleswellbeingmeasures>

but also for the society in which they live'.²² Local Authorities have a duty to assess and ensure sufficiency of children's play opportunities since they became the first country in the world to legislate on play (Children and Families Wales Measure 2010) supported by a body of research that demonstrates the diverse benefits of play and contact with nature and the environment.²³

Young people (11-18yrs) in our survey were asked about their participation in activities/hobbies outside school and children (4-10yrs) were asked if they had fun at the weekend.

The majority of children and young people were given opportunities to have fun or do hobbies/activities:

- 93% of young people (11-18yrs) took part in activities and hobbies outside school
- 97% of children (8-10yrs) and 100% of children (4-7yrs) had fun at the weekend.

It's really fun and we get to go down the caravan. 4-7yrs

One young person complained that the funding for his clubs had been cut and another wanted to do more group activities writing in response to 'What would make care better? '

To do more activities with the other residents of the house and be included in more social activities. 11-18yrs

Some young people thought that they were given more opportunities in care than they had previously experienced:

You get to do fun things that you have never had the chance to do in life. 11-18yrs

Exploring the natural world

Outdoor play and connection to the natural environment can improve physical and mental health²⁴ but about 11% of children (6-15yrs)

Most felt they got to explore the outdoors, but 12% of young people (11-18yrs) and 10% of children (8-10yrs) were not given these experiences: similar proportions to the children in the population and looked after children in England.

²² https://gov.wales/dcells/publications/policy_strategy_and_planning/early-wales/playpolicy/playpolicye.pdf?lang=en

²³ <https://www.rspb.org.uk/globalassets/downloads/documents/positions/education/every-child-outdoors---wales.pdf>

²⁴ Capaldi, C. A., Passmore, H.A., Nisbet, E. K., Zelenski, J. M., & Dopko, R. L. (2015). Flourishing in nature: A review of the benefits of connecting with nature and its application as a wellbeing intervention. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 5(4), 1-16.

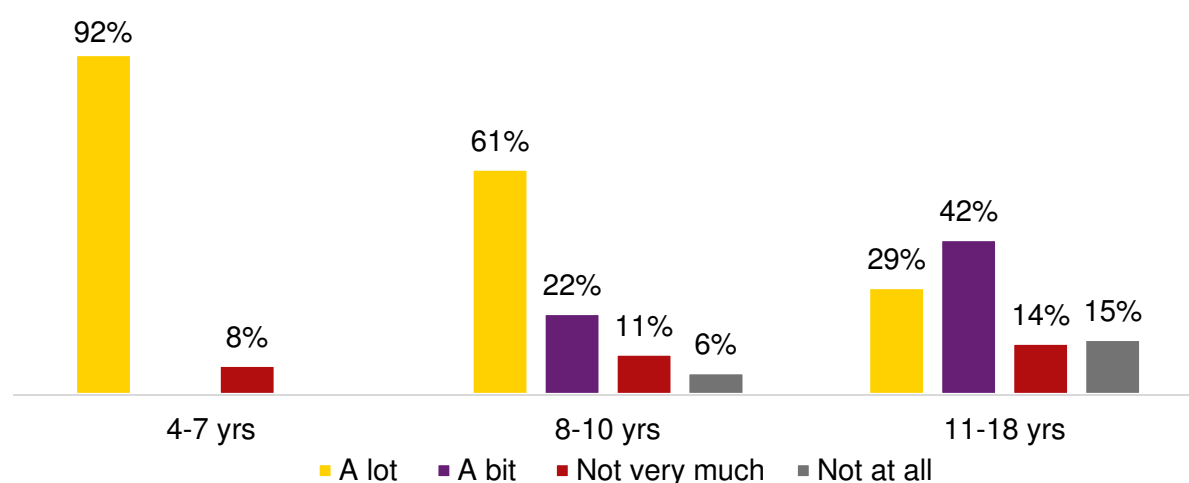
growing up in Wales had not visited the natural environment in the previous year.²⁵ In our survey, looked after children (8-10yrs) and young people (11-18yrs) were asked if they were given opportunities to explore the natural world, such as visiting parks, beaches or forests.

Liking school

All the children and young people were asked if they liked school. The same question has been asked in a national survey 'The Health Behaviour of School-Aged Children (HBSC)' completed in schools around the world including in Wales 26 where about a quarter of young people (11-15yrs) liked school 'a lot'.

In our survey there was a very similar response to national survey findings with 29% of looked after children liking school 'a lot'. Unlike the national results, a larger proportion of looked after boys (30%) liked school 'a lot' compared to 26% of boys in the Welsh population.

Figure 6: Liking school (n=624)



The youngest children were the most positive about school with 92% stating that they liked school 'a lot'. (Figure 6)

Children did not provide comments on their school experience except for one 4-7 year old who wrote:

²⁵ National Survey for Wales <http://gov.wales/statistics-and-research/national-survey>

²⁶ <https://gov.wales/docs/caecd/research/2015/151022-health-behaviour-school-children-2013-14-key-findings-en.pdf>

I don't like coming to school sometimes, but I like it on the days we have nurture. 4-7yrs

Support for learning

Carers are doing a good job of supporting children's learning. Overall, a large proportion (94%) of children and young people (8-18yrs) thought that their carers showed an interest in their education. In comparison, HBSC survey report on England (11-15yrs) reported that 90% of children and young people in the population felt that their parents were interested in what happened at school.

Learning life skills

Young people were asked if they were given opportunities to practice life skills such as going to the bank, cooking and washing clothes.

The majority (86%) thought they were given the chance to practice life skills, but one in seven (14%) thought they were being inadequately prepared and not given more opportunities

(Care) has helped with gaining independence – promoting ILS- taking responsibility for myself, cleaning up and cooking, washing clothes. 11-18yrs

Young people in care need more freedom and independence as they get older- they are wrapped in cotton wool. 11-18yrs

Overall, most children and young people thought they were supported by caring adults and provided with opportunities to develop through education and access to activities and play.

The next section will consider whether children and young people felt that some of their other rights were being met.

Rights

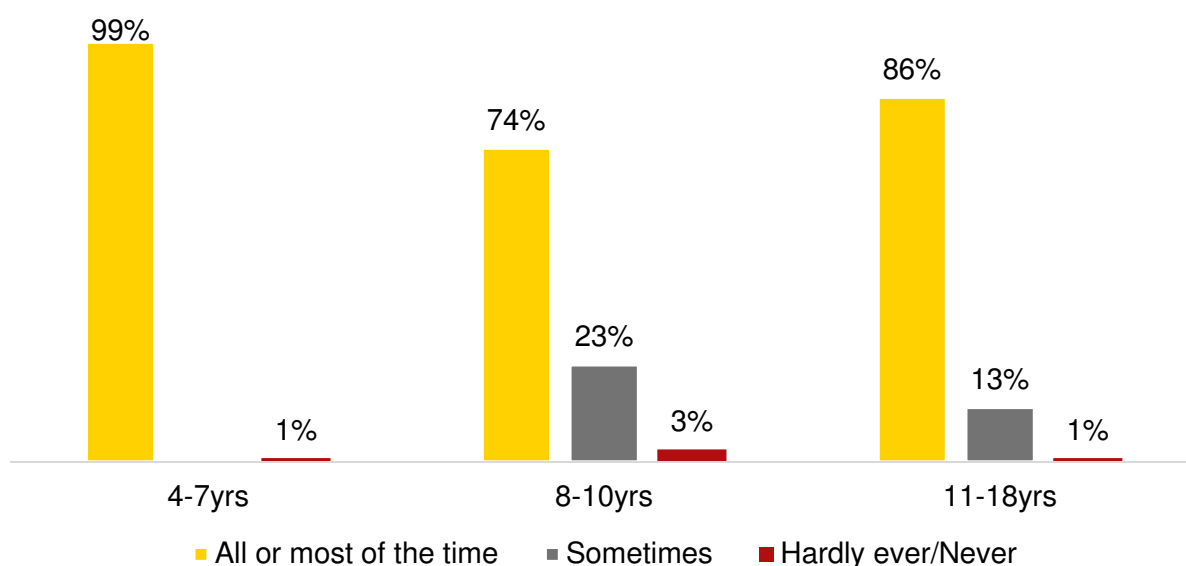
Feeling safe

Children's right to life and protection from harm are set out in Article 6 and Article 19 of the United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child (UNCRC, 1991). Analysis of The Children's World Survey shows that in England and Wales, 69% of 8 year olds, 76% of 10 year olds and 78% of 12 years olds felt 'totally safe' at home.

In our survey children and young people were asked if they felt safe where they lived. Children (4-7yrs) were given two options 'Mostly yes' and 'Mostly no', whereas children (8-10yrs) and young people (11-18yrs) could respond 'All or most of the time', 'Sometimes', 'Hardly ever' or 'Never'.

The vast majority of children and young people did feel safe in their placements (Figure 7). In fact, a larger proportion of looked after children 'always' felt safe in comparison with children in the general population.

Figure 7: Feeling safe in placements



Some children and young people wrote comments comparing how they had felt living with their parents and how they now felt in care:

I am more safe and happy and settled because I trust them (carers) very much.
8-10yrs

The survey asks about how children feel and four children and young people recorded 'never' feeling safe in their foster placements. The way children felt may reflect previous traumatic experiences, previous placement moves, as well as their present situation.

Free from bullying

There is evidence that bullying can have a very serious impact on children's well-being leading to truancy, depression and suicide. In our survey, children were asked if they were afraid of going to school because of fear of bullying.

Just under a third of children aged 8-10yrs (31%) and young people (30%) were fearful of going to school because of bullying. Although the question in our survey is not identical to national surveys, it appears that looked after children and young people are reporting more bullying.

In the pilot local authorities:

- There was a statistically significant gender difference for those looked after aged 11-18yrs: 42% of girls were afraid to go to school because of bullying compared to only 18% of boys.²⁷
- 69% of 8-10yrs and 70% of 11-18yrs of looked after children stated they were 'hardly ever' or 'never' afraid of bullying compared to 91% of children (10-15yrs) in Wales who were not experiencing bullying²⁸.
- The majority (82%) of looked after children who were afraid of bullying reported that they had support to stop the bullying.

I used to get bullied because I didn't live with my parents and no-one helped me. Then it got better, so I think it would be good if young people like me could spread their story everywhere. 11-18yrs

Feeling different

In our survey, the 11-18yrs age group were asked, "If adults did things that made them feel embarrassed about being in care."

Most young people (86%) did not experience adults as drawing negative attention to their care status. Some young people wrote about feeling different at school parents'

²⁷ $\chi^2(5, n=326) = 23.010, p < .001, \phi -.266.$
²⁸

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/adhocs/005283selectedchildrenswellbeingmeasuresbycountry>

evenings with other children asking if their carers were their parents. Other young people felt that it was the way people acted or that their appearance was so different from their carers/staff that questions were asked, rather than it being what they said. Young people did not like having to explain why they were in care and felt that some of the procedures marked them out as 'different' writing:

In parent's evenings, people say, "This is your mam, isn't it?" 11-18yrs

When they introduce me to people they say, "This is my foster daughter". That puts me on the spot a bit and people ask a lot of questions about being in care and it makes me feel really uncomfortable about the situation I'm in. 11-18yrs

I do not like it when adults tell people I'm in care. 11-18yrs

My mum says that I am one of "Those care kids." 11-18yrs

Let me be more like people who are not in foster care. 11-18yrs

LAC meetings can be awkward due to the fact your school find out about your issues or health issues which can be embarrassing, and I think there is no need for them to know. I think you should get to choose who attends (minus IRO, social workers and foster carer). 11-18yrs

We have to have meetings before we can do things like go on holiday. 8-10yrs

Being able to speak to the social worker

Children and young people aged 8-18yrs were asked whether they knew they could speak to their social worker on their own. Young people (11-18yrs) were also asked if they could get in touch with their social worker.

- Although the majority knew they had the right to speak to their social worker on their own, 15% of children (8-10yrs) and 3% of young people (11-18yrs) did not know they could ask for privacy.
- Most young people could get in touch with their social workers but it was difficult for 19% young people and some felt that they were not listened to or that promises were broken.

I don't like how social workers speak to us, and promise us stuff that never happens. 11-18yrs

Social workers answer your phones! 11-18yrs

Some young people wanted their workers to visit more and spend more time with them writing:

I would like to go places with my social worker and talk about my life and how it is going to be better. 11-18yrs

These findings on speaking to and ease of getting in touch with the social worker are very similar to the views of looked after children and young people in England.

Feeling involved in decision-making

Research on well-being and mental health suggests that children and young people who feel they have some control over their lives do better educationally, are less prone to depression and anxiety, and have greater resilience in the face of adversity.²⁹ Article 12 and 13 of the UNCRC also state that it is a child's right to have information and to be involved in decisions that affect their lives. In our survey, children and young people (8-10yrs and 11-18yrs) were asked if they felt involved in the decisions that social workers were making about their lives.

Most did feel included in social work decision-making, for example writing:

I feel like my thoughts and feelings are taken into account all the time. 11-18yrs

17% of 11-18yrs and 20% of those aged 8-10yrs did not feel listened to and included.

A large number of comments left on the survey from children and young people were about wanting to be included more:

The team manager should listen to what I want to do before deciding. 11-18yrs

[Care] is terrible because people are making decisions about your life. 11-18yrs

Move [name] and [name] out of my foster home because I'm in a single placement and my social worker [name] said it was fine without asking me about it. 11-18yrs

You never get listened to, you don't get a say in what you want, and most of the time you are never told what is happening in your family. 11-18yrs

They only include me when I want to do the things that they want me to do. A team manager who've I never met always has the final say. 11-18yrs

I would like to know when I can go back and live with my mum. I don't know when this will be and no-one is telling me. 8-10yrs

I feel the social worker needs to listen to me more and remember it's my life and not dads. 8-10yrs

²⁹ The Children's Society (2015). *The Good Childhood Report*. London: The Children's Society.

I would like questions answered if I don't know what's happening. 4-7yrs

Article 39 of the UNCRC states that children have a right to help if they have experienced harm. The next section considers children and young people's views on whether they felt they were enabled to recover from earlier trauma.

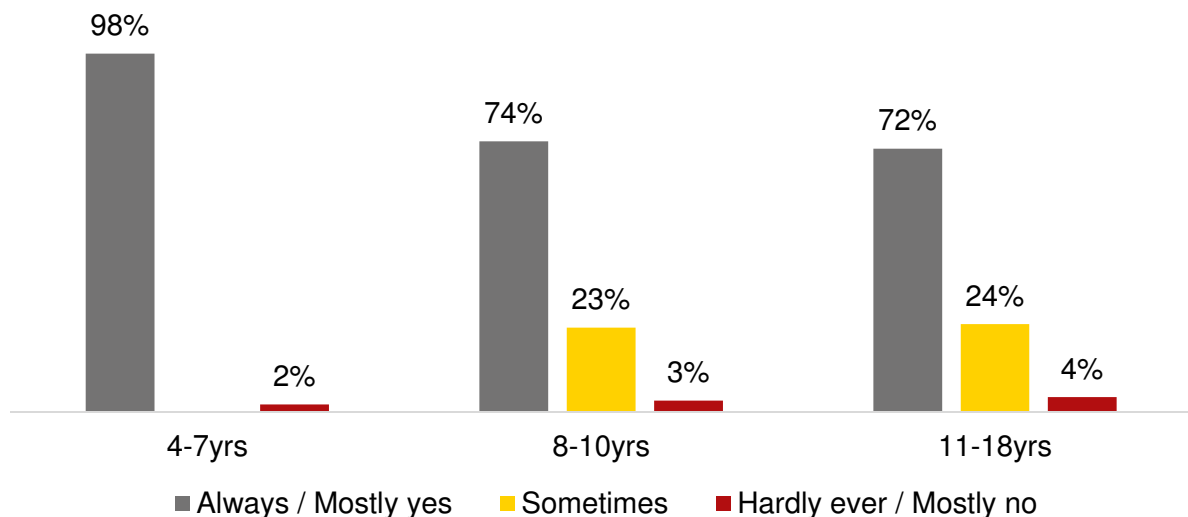
Recovery

Feeling settled

Children and young people were asked if they felt settled and felt they belonged in their placements.

The majority were settled (Figure 8) but young people (11-18yrs) who had more than five placements were more likely to record that they 'hardly ever' or 'never' felt settled.³⁰

Figure 8: Children and young people's view on whether they felt settled where they lived



Liking bedrooms

Over 95% of children and young people liked their bedrooms.

Some of the children commented that they did not like their bedroom because they had to share with a sibling and wanted more space.

³⁰ $\chi^2 (2, n=346) = 18.954, p < .001, \text{Cramer's } V=.234$

Having sensitive carers

Children and young people were asked if they felt their carers noticed how they were feeling.

The majority (89% of 11-18yrs, 95% of 8-10yrs and 92% of 4-7yrs) thought their carers did notice how they were feeling.

A few young people felt they were not understood by their carers or wanted more from their carers writing:

I felt in my previous foster placement I could have received better emotional support as I needed to attend court as a victim. 11-18yrs

Foster carers to have more understanding about how I feel and what I've been through. 11-18yrs

My foster carers can misunderstand me sometimes and they don't trust me and think I steal and lie, which is hurtful ...because I don't. 11-18yrs

The younger children sometimes were concerned about carers who shouted.

... if the carers didn't shout at my sister. 4-7yrs

(Carer) shouts when I don't do as I'm told. 4-7yrs

Being trusted and given second chances

Trust was one of the words used most frequently by children in the focus groups that informed the development of our survey. Being able to trust the adults in their lives and in turn being trusted by them was very important for children and young people. Being trusted also implies that young people are given roles other than that of a 'looked after child'. Young people were asked if they were given opportunities to '*show they could be trusted*'.

- The majority (89%) did think they were given opportunities to be trusted
- 11% felt they were 'hardly ever' or 'never' trusted and 10% thought they were not given a second chance if they made an error of judgment.
- In comparison with looked after young people in England, more Welsh young people felt they were not given opportunities to be trusted: 6% in England and 11% in Wales.

One young person wrote:

In the past I have felt awkward being seen with a support worker if I bumped into friends. I'm pleased that I am now trusted to go shopping alone. I feel

extremely proud of myself at the moment with everything I have achieved. 11-18yrs

Young people wrote about wanting to be trusted and to be given more freedom:

More freedom. Allowed out with friends outside my street. Longer than 10mins on the phone with my parents. 11-18yrs

For the adults looking after me to be more relaxed and trust me. 11-18yrs

I would like to go to the shop on my own. 11-18yrs

The staff want to check on my safety all the time and it's annoying. 11-18yrs

I would like to have my phone with me more often. 8-10yrs

The younger children (8-10yrs) were asked if they were given opportunities to be trusted by helping the teacher, as our focus groups said that looked after children were less likely to be given trusted tasks such as showing visitors round the school or being asked to carry a message.

13% of children (8-10yrs) felt they were not given the chance to be trusted in school.

Doing the same things as friends

Most (84%) young people (11-18yrs) felt they were given the opportunity to do similar things as their friends but 16% felt they were unable to, replicating the responses given by looked after young people in England.

Some Welsh young people wrote that they felt they were treated differently to their friends and did not always seem to understand why that might be the case:

They make me go to bed earlier than my friends who are not in care. 11-18yrs

Say I can't be in photos. 11-18yrs

(I want to) be able to do what normal teenagers do, like going out and not having to be by the carer's side 24/7. 11-18yrs

Young people complained about the impact of checks on their friend's families and described the checks as a "rule".

The 23 hour rule- staying overnight with friends. Checks with friend's parents, as this can be embarrassing. 11-18yrs

Many comments were from young people who felt that some of the 'rules' were unnecessary, unfair and restrictive. Responding to a question on 'What would make care better?' many young people wrote about rules:

More homely, less rules, be a normal teenager. 11-18yrs

People not constantly looking over my shoulder. 11-18yrs

- Contacting friends online is the way most teenagers communicate but 11% of young people recorded that they could not connect to the Internet from their placements.
- In comparison, only 2% of Welsh households with 2 adults and children and 9% of single parents did not have an internet connection in 2016/17.³¹
- Young people who did not have access to the Internet outside school were also more likely to report the lack of a good friend.³²

Young people wrote:

I think I should have internet access at the residential home I live in. 11-18yrs

Ease up on the mobile phone access rule and access to the Internet. 11-18yrs

Being able to use the computer at home and to be able to walk with my friends outside school. 11-18yrs

Worries

Children and young people were asked if they ever worried about their feelings or behaviour.

- The majority (64%) answered that they were worrying 'most or some of the time'.
- One in ten children (8-10yrs) and 25% of young people (11-18yrs) thought they had insufficient help.

Children and young people wrote about their worries:

I don't feel the social worker has put enough plans in place for my move on (post 18yrs) and I am scared about what will happen to me. 11-18yrs

³¹ National Survey for Wales 2016-2017 <https://gov.wales/statistics-and-research/national-survey/?tab=current&lang=en>

³² $\chi^2(1, n=341) = 6.774, p < .01 \phi .141$.

I'd like to move further away so that if my dad gets out of prison he can't be near us. I don't want him to know where we live. 8-10yrs

I find it hard to control my feelings ... but I get support. 8-10yrs

I know I can sometimes get emotional. I like to cry about it by myself (but) I do speak to the foster carer about it. 8-10yrs

Feelings about appearance

The Good Childhood reports undertaken by The Children's Society have highlighted the strong association between unhappiness with personal appearance and having low well-being. In the UK general population there is a stark gender difference with girls being much unhappier with their appearance compared to boys. Other research has also highlighted the link, particularly amongst teenage girls, between poor body image and low self-esteem, depression, eating disorders and self-harm.³³ We might expect looked after children to report even higher rates of dissatisfaction with appearance, as the impact of trauma and abuse can have a detrimental effect on self-image.³⁴

Our survey found nearly one in five looked after young people (19%) were unhappy with their appearance compared to 10% of young people growing up in Wales.³⁵

- There was also a statistically significant gender difference amongst looked after young people with 31% of girls being unhappy with their appearance in comparison with 7% of the boys.³⁶
- In comparison with looked after young people in England, there was a larger proportion of young people unhappy with their appearance (13% England and 19% Wales dislike appearance) and a larger gender difference (19% girls unhappy in England compared to 31% in Wales). We do not know which factors, practices or policies are driving the disparity.

³³ Cash, T.F. and Smolak, L., Eds. (2011). *Body Image: A Handbook of Science, Practice, and Prevention*, Guilford Press; New York.

³⁴ Treuer, T., Koperdák, M., Rózsa, S. & Füredi, J. (2005). The impact of physical and sexual abuse on body image in eating disorders. *Eur. Eat. Disorders Rev*, 13, 106–111.

³⁵

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/adhocs/005283selectedchildrenswellbeingmeasuresbycountry>

³⁶ $\chi^2(1, n=351) = 33.806, p < .000 \phi .310$.

Understanding the reasons for being looked after

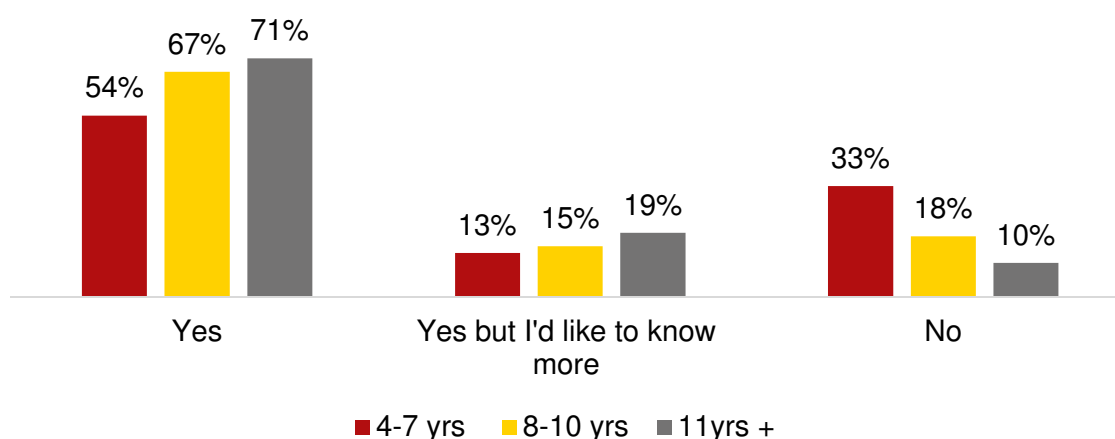
In our survey, children and young people were asked if an adult had explained why they were in care (Figure 9). Having a coherent account of one's history and understanding the reasons that led to becoming looked after are important in the development of an integrated identity and in recovery from abuse and neglect.³⁷

Most children and young people did understand why they were in care but the proportion of children who were unclear or confused was greatest in the youngest age groups.

A third (33%) of the youngest children (4-7yrs) felt that they had not had any explanation, as to why they were in care.

Even those aged 11-18yrs did not feel fully informed with one in ten feeling that no-one had explained and a further 19% wanted more information. Lack of understanding replicates the findings from looked after children and young people in England, where 31% of children (4-7yrs) felt they had not had an explanation.

Figure 9: Children and young people's feelings about whether an adult has explained the reasons why they were looked after



³⁷ Adshead, G. (2012). Their dark materials: narratives and recovery in forensic practice. Royal College of Psychiatrists Publication Archives, available at: www.rcpsych.ac.uk (accessed 31 January 2013).

Adler, J. M. (2012). Living into the story: agency and coherence in a longitudinal study of narrative identity development and mental health over the course of psychotherapy. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 102(2), 367.

Children and young people were also asked more general questions about their well-being with the space to provide comments on 'What would make care better? The final section of our findings reports how children were feeling about their lives and provides a comparison of looked after young people's well-being with young people in the Welsh child population

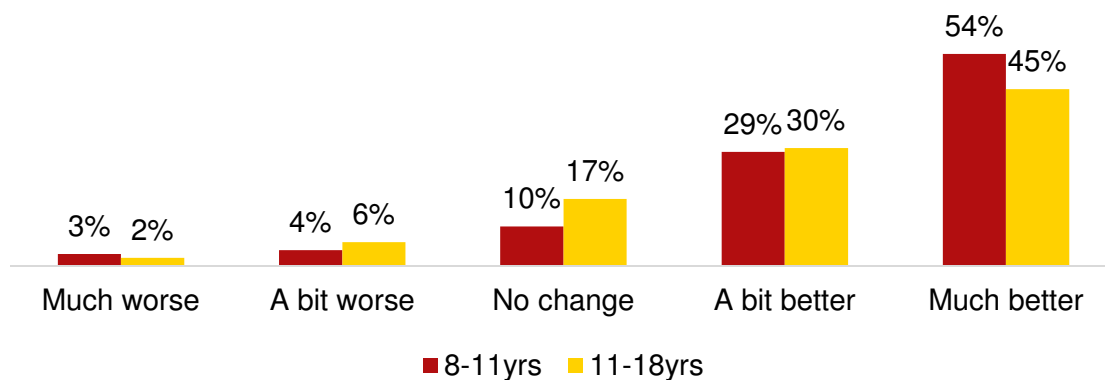
Well-being

Feeling that life is getting better

Children and young people were asked if their lives were getting better.

The majority (77%) thought that life was better with just 8% feeling that life was getting worse (Figure 10). A response similar to looked after children in England.

Figure 10: Is life getting better?



Young people's text comments revealed the way they were feeling about their lives. Most young people were positive, as in these examples:

I have a happy life. I have a better life in foster care. 11-18yrs

Being in care makes my life better by having a safe house and bedroom. 8-10yrs

I would like to share my feelings because before I was angry and unhappy but now I'm in care I feel a lot more happy. 8-10yrs

'What would make care better?' and other comments

Young people and children were asked 'what would make care better?' and if they had any other comments.

Some young people wrote that they just wanted to thank their carers and social worker and that there was nothing that could be improved.

I like having pocket money. I like having new clothes and new things to bring to school. I like my carer cooking for me. She is kind. 4-7yrs

I feel happy. I don't want to be with another family. 8-10yrs

I'd like to say to other kids 'Don't be scared'. You'll be OK. If you have troubles, you'll always have someone by your side. 11-18yrs

Being in care is better than I thought. 11-18yrs

This is the best experience I have had in a life time. I wish my carer had looked after since the day I was born. People like me are very lucky. 11-18yrs

One child emphasised how foster care could be helpful for others:

We need more foster carers in the world, as some children from other countries are living on the streets. 8-10yrs

Some had a more negative experience:

Being in care is just years of broken promises until eventually give up on trying. 11-18yrs

*It's a pile of s*** ... from when I first moved into care the amount of social workers I have had has been unbelievable... the amount of houses I got moved to ... don't get me wrong some places have been alright but most have been awful. 11-18yrs*

I do not like being in care. 8-10yrs

The majority of comments about what would make care better were about wanting:

- more contact with family members,
- greater independence,
- more inclusion and
- fewer restrictions on their lives

Food was important for some. Some of the youngest children wanted more chocolate, ice cream, toys, trampolines, and a bigger house and gardens, but most wrote about wanting more contact.

Family time and involvement

I like my life more now, as I get to see mam more. 8-10yrs

I want to go to my house not (carer's name) house. 4-7yrs

To see my dad and grandad a bit more. 4-7yrs

I'd like to have more time with my mam. 8-10yrs

I want to see my mam on her birthday and want to spend time alone with dad. 8-10yrs

I would like my mum and dad to visit me. I would like to see my mum and dad in the same room. Sometimes I am sad and sometimes having presents makes me happy. 4-7yrs

For my mummy to come to our house and have dinner with us. 4-7yrs

I would like to see my sister again. 8-10yrs

I wish I could live with (parents). 8-10yrs

Seeing my brothers and sisters more. 11-18yrs

Going home [would make care better]. 11-18yrs

Mum to come to meetings. 11-18yrs

Placement and system issues

Foster carers not having their own kids. 11-18yrs

Not having to share a bathroom. 8-10yrs

Not having to share a bedroom. 8-10yrs

Would like to have a phone. 8-10yrs

More money 8-10yrs

I think there are too many rules for foster children ... e.g. children not being allowed on holiday. 8-10yrs

Allowed to wear the stuff you want and watch the stuff you want and not feel left out. 11-18yrs

More frequent visits from the social worker and better support systems in place. Sometimes there isn't anything to help and that can be difficult for me. 11-18yrs

More trust. 11-18yrs

Involvement in decision-making

I would like to have the opportunity to be involved in decisions which relate to me. 8-10yrs

A letter of what's been said by people at meetings I'm not at. 8-10yrs

In the past most opinions and situations that I have brought up have been ignored (to do with siblings) I don't really trust social workers anymore. 11-18yrs

I feel included in the discussion, but I feel I don't have a say in the decision. 11-18yrs

I am 16 and my social worker never even tells me when there's a meeting about me and doesn't let me make any decisions by myself. 11-18yrs

(I want) a new social worker and somebody who'll actually listen to me instead of going against me. 11-18yrs

The four well-being scales

The survey for young people (11-18yrs) included four well-being scales that are also used as measures of the UK child population's well-being. The scales were not used with the younger children. The four (0-10) scales ask about: overall life satisfaction, how happy you felt yesterday, whether the things you do in life are worthwhile and feelings of positivity about the future.

Most young people had moderate to high well-being on all four scales

Looked after young people's scores were placed into the thresholds of low (0-4), moderate (5-6), high (7-8) and very high (9-10) (Figure 11).

The ONS published results for young people in Wales (Figure 12) provide comparison, although the ONS age range (10-15yrs) slightly differs from our sample (11-18yrs) and does not include a question on positivity about the future.

Figure 11: The well-being of looked after young people aged 11-18yrs (n=345) weighted by gender.

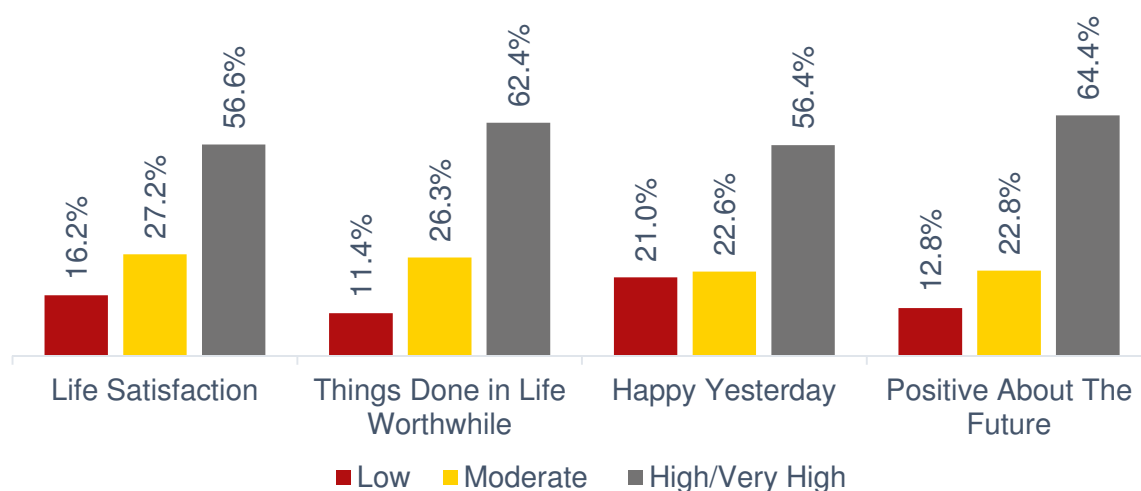
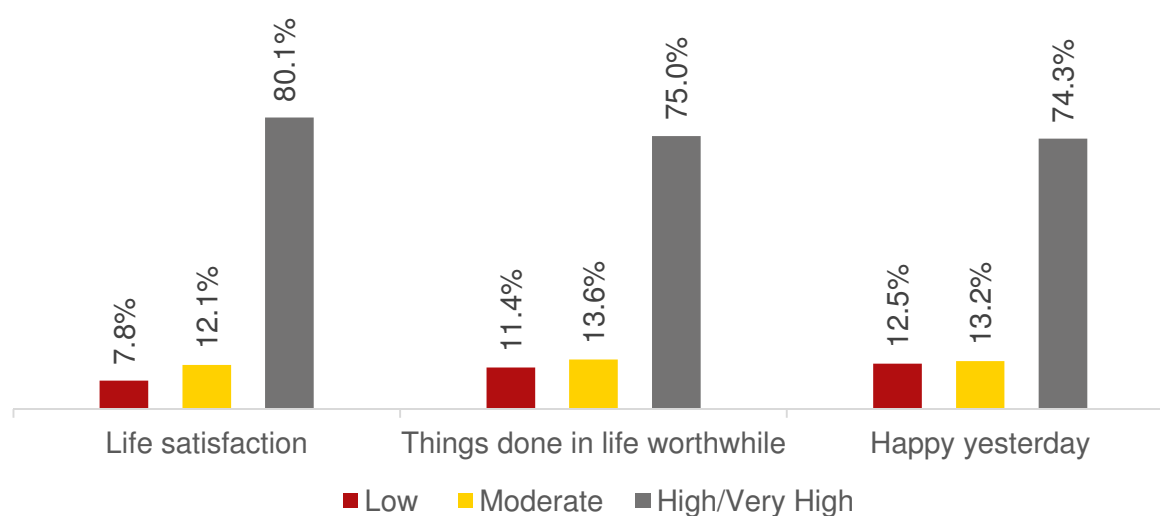


Figure 12: Young people in Wales aged 10-15yrs ONS reported data equally weighted by age and gender³⁸



38

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/adhocs/005283selectedchildrenswellbeingmeasuresbycountry>

23% of young people had a low score on at least one of the four scales.

Although the majority of looked after young people had moderate levels of well-being, there was a larger proportion of looked after young people at the lowest end of the scale. The differences can be more clearly seen (Table 7) using UK data that was supplied by The Children's Society³⁹ on an age range (10-17yrs) that more closely matches the survey sample and where the questions are identical.

Table 7: Comparing well-being scores of looked after young people (11-18yrs) in Wales and young people (11-17yrs) in the UK general population: the means and percentages with low or very high scores

		Mean (out of 10)	% with low scores (0-4)	% with very high scores (9-10)
Satisfaction with life as a whole	The Good Childhood report 2017	7.5	5%	27%
	Your Life, Your Care Wales	6.7	16%	34%
Feel life is worthwhile	The Good Childhood report 2017	7.5	6%	29%
	Your Life, Your Care Wales	7.1	11%	38%
Happy yesterday	The Good Childhood report 2017	7.3	8%	26%
	Your Life, Your Care Wales	6.6	21%	34%
Positivity about the future	The Good Childhood report 2017	6.8	7%	19%
	Your Life, Your Care Wales	7.1	13%	34%

³⁹ Data analysed for this comparison by Alexandra Turner and Larissa Pople using The Children's Society household surveys (*The Good Childhood Report 2017*).

Whilst about one in six had low scores, a third of young people were in the very high range: a larger proportion of very high scores than is reported by young people in the general population. Looked after young people's responses indicate that there is a minority who are really struggling. In the next section, we will take a closer look at the characteristics of the children and young people who had low well-being.

Low well-being: 4-7yrs age group

Children in this age group did not complete the well-being scales. Instead we reviewed their responses to all the questions and categorised children as likely to have low well-being if they responded negatively to at least two of the questions.

- 95% of children aged 4-7yrs had moderate to high well-being.
- Six children (5%) three girls and three boys gave many negative responses and their overall profile suggested that these six children had low well-being.

- All children aged 4-7yrs with low well-being felt that no-one had explained why they were in care.
- Three of the six children wrote that they wanted to see family members or go home.
- Two children did not trust their social worker.
- One child did not know who their social worker was and felt that her carers did not notice how she was feeling.

Low well-being: 8-10yrs age group

- The majority (94%) of children aged 8-10yrs had moderate to high well-being.
- Eleven children (6%) gave negative responses to at least three survey questions and that group of children were categorised as having low well-being.

The 8-10 year olds with low well-being recorded that they:

- Did not know why they were in care
- Did not always feel settled in their placements
- Were worried about their feelings or behaviour
- Did not like school and were afraid to go to school because of bullying
- Saw their mums, dads and siblings too little
- Did not have opportunities to explore the outdoors
- Did not know they could speak to their social worker in private or feel included in decisions made about their lives.

Low well-being: 11-18yrs age group

Young people who scored low on two or more of the four well-being scales were categorised as having low well-being.

- 82% of young people had high or moderate well-being and 59 (18%) young people had low scores.
- Girls were about twice as likely to have low well-being compared to boys.
- Those who experienced five or more placements more likely to have low well-being

Unlike our findings in England where the longer a young person had been in care the more likely it was their well-being would be good, in Wales there were no statistical differences by length of time in care.

The following factors had the biggest statistical effect on low well-being:

- Young people who **disliked their appearance** were **7 times more likely to have low well-being**: 62% of those with low well-being did not like their appearance.
- Young people **without a trusted adult in their lives** were **5 times more likely to have low well-being**: a third of those with low well-being had no trusted adult.
- Young people who were **unhappy in their placements** were **4 times more likely to have low well-being**. These young people reported feeling unsafe, unsettled, mistrusted their carers and felt that their carers were insensitive and disinterested in their education.
- Young people who **did not have a good friend** were **3 times more likely to have low well-being**. Young people felt unable to do the same things as friends and reported doing fewer activities/hobbies outside school and did not visit the natural world. Lack of a good friend was also statistically associated with disliking school.
- Young people who had **a poor relationship with their social worker** were **3 times more likely to have low well-being**. They felt the reasons they were in care hadn't been explained, mistrusted their social worker, felt uninvolved in decision making and felt that negative attention was drawn to their care status.
- Young people who **did not feel they were given opportunities to be trusted** or **second chances** or the opportunity to **practice life skills** were about **twice as likely to have low well-being**.

Variation by gender in well-being

There were more girls (23%) than boys (13%) with low well-being with some variation in the factors predicting their well-being.⁴⁰

- Happiness with appearance was the most important factor for boys and girls but was more strongly associated with well-being for girls.⁴¹
- For girls, trusting their social worker was associated with higher well-being: 90% of girls with high/moderate well-being trusted their social worker compared with 55% of girls with low well-being.⁴²
- For boys, being given opportunities to explore the outdoors also predicted well-being.⁴³

⁴⁰ $\chi^2(1, n=319) = 4.692, p = .040, \phi = .121$.

⁴¹ Girls: $\chi^2(1, n=159) = 45.174, p < .000, \phi = .533$. Boys: $\chi^2(1, n=159) = 36.521, p < .000, \phi = .479$.

⁴² Girls: $\chi^2(1, n=151) = 23.620, p < .000, \phi = .396$.

⁴³ Boys: $\chi^2(1, n=157) = 5.701, p = .017, \phi = .191$.

Variation by local authority

One of the benefits of the Bright Spots surveys is that we engage with each local authority to understand the experience of their care population, but we are also able to get a national picture of children's experience by collecting the same data in all areas. Each local authority participating in the survey were given their own bespoke report of findings, setting out the areas where they were doing well and where things could be improved. These reports help the local authority to develop a tailored local response to the survey findings and act on what their children and young people have told them.

Due to the very small sample in one local authority (n=15: 20% of their care population), the authority was excluded from the more detailed analysis of well-being by local authority. In the other five local authorities the issues and Bright Spots we identified in each area varied. Bright Spots were identified where children and young people in an area did better than the general population or statistical analysis showed them to be doing significantly better than all the looked after children in our

In any given local authority there were several questions where their children and young people in care felt significantly better or worse than other looked after young people who took part in the pilot. Therefore, whilst there were some common positive messages and areas for improvement, each area also had specific issues to address.

sample

For example, children and young people in care were more likely than children in the general population to feel safe at home in all five local authorities. In all but one local authority, a higher proportion of children and young people in care also reported that their carers took an interest in what they did in school or college than children in the general population who felt their parents took an interest in their education. In terms of areas for improvement, we recommended that all the local authorities look at contact arrangements and ensuring that all children receive an explanation of why they are in care.

However, other issues varied – in some areas children and/or young people were more likely than looked after children in the other Welsh authorities to report that: they got the chance to practice life skills, do the same things as their friends, or explore the outdoors. Particular issues were flagged in individual local authorities where, for example, a lower proportion of their children and/or young people than in other local authorities knew they could speak to their social worker on their own; felt that they got support with their worries; or trusted their social workers.

When looking at the national data set as a whole we gained further insights into variation.

The proportion of young people with low well-being varied in different local authorities. Only 3% of young people had low well-being in one local authority, whilst in another 37.5 % had low well-being.

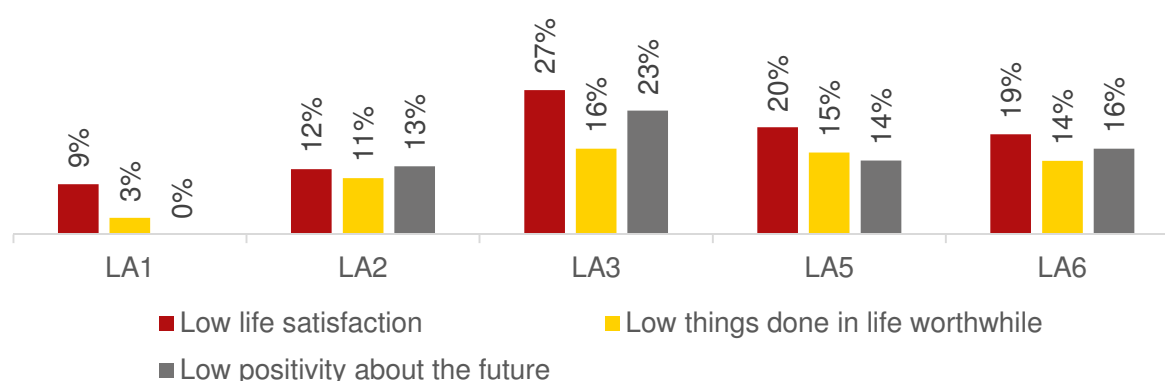
The local authority with the fewest young people with low well-being was significantly different from the other five authorities: more of their young people had been looked after for a shorter period. However, there were no statistical differences by local authority in the number of placements young people had experienced or their feelings about their appearance.

Our analysis of the national data also revealed that local authorities differed by:

- young people's feelings about being settled in their placements⁴⁴ ;
- the proportion of young people with no contact with either parent⁴⁵; and
- those who worried 'all the time/sometimes' about their feelings or behaviour.⁴⁶

Young people with low scores on three of the 4 well-being scales are shown in Figure 13. The fourth well-being scale (feelings of happiness yesterday) did not differ by local authority area.

Figure 13: Low scores on three well-being scales for young people in 5 Welsh local authorities



⁴⁴ $\chi^2(4, n=361) = 19.513, p < .001$ Cramer's V .232. range 18%-39% not settled

⁴⁵ $\chi^2(4, n=339) = 12.856, p < .012$ Cramer's V .195 range 9%-30% with no parental contact

⁴⁶ $\chi^2(4, n=339) = 9.371, p < .05$ Cramer's V .165 range 29%-56% worrying about feelings or behaviour

Pilot local authorities experience of the survey

Benefits of running the survey

Local authorities thought that the survey gave reliable and empirical evidence of what looked after children and young people felt about their lives. Most of the authorities already had plans to use the survey findings in their corporate parenting strategy, and others were committed to discussing how the findings might be incorporated. The reports were praised for their clarity of presentation and clear suggestions for actions at a policy and practice level.

All authorities agreed it took considerable commitment to achieve good response rates, when dealing with other issues such as heavy snowfall during the survey period, staff turnover and the implementation of new systems. It was challenging for some authorities to prioritise this survey over other similar surveys being conducted in the same time period, but they appreciated the clarity of findings, the summaries for children, young people and staff, which offered scope for implementing change very quickly.

Understanding looked after children's experience

Authorities were pleased to receive evidence of areas of practice that children and young people thought were going well. In one authority, levels of trust in social workers remained very high, even when there had been a lot of staff turnover. Local authorities welcomed evidence of positive scores that they could attribute to local initiatives over the past five years. For example, in one authority, a high proportion of children and young people lived with a pet and this was attributed to a focused change of policy in this area over recent years. Very strong partnership arrangements between social care and education was associated in another authority with the high proportion of children and young people reporting that they enjoyed school. In a third authority, a foster carers' pack of independent living skills was thought to have contributed to the positive responses about having the opportunity to learn life skills.

Local authorities were also interested to learn of areas that could be improved. One authority was keen to understand more about the bullying experiences that were reported by their looked after children and young people. Others were concerned to address the numbers of children who reported that they did not know who their social worker was, or who lacked information about why they were in care.

Informing service improvement

Most authorities had already identified priorities for their strategic planning and were able to see how the survey findings could support these. Two authorities had reviewed their arrangements for reviewing contact and intended to use their children's responses to improve their review. The reports were especially welcomed as providing reliable evidence that concerns already identified within local authorities

were well founded and would provide opportunities to promote greater coordination across services in their areas.

Challenging practice

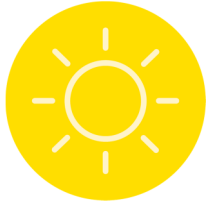
Some authorities experienced challenges in conducting the survey which enabled useful learning to take place. One authority found that the process of distributing communications about the survey revealed different understandings and practices between social care and education.

Distributing the survey to children as young as four-years-old challenged the views of some adults in terms of whether young children had the competence to answer survey questions. Although it is possible that individual children may struggle with understanding due to, for example, specific developmental delays, the questions have been carefully tested with younger children. When the survey was developed University of Bristol conducted cognitive interviews with children, observing them whilst completing the survey and exploring how and whether they understood the questions, to ensure that the language and areas explored in the questions were appropriate for each age group. In the surveys conducted in England and Wales most of the youngest children have been able, with the help of a trusted adult, to complete the survey and have given thoughtful and at times challenging responses.

Welsh authorities reported that some responses enabled established practices to be challenged and thought about in a fresh way. Although all authorities were confident that social workers introduced themselves to children and young people, not all children and young people reported knowing the identity of their social worker. A quarter of the children 4-7yrs did not know who their worker was. Findings provided the opportunity for authorities to think in a more nuanced way about how introductions are made, what information is left for children and young people to keep, and how this is reviewed. In another authority, discussion was had about how to incorporate regular questions in review meetings to check whether children and young people wanted to know more about the reasons they were in care.

Summary

Implications for practice



The majority of looked after children and young people in Wales had moderate to high subjective well-being.

Well-being

Children and young people in care felt safe and settled in their placements, trusted their carers and enjoyed school just as much as young people in the Welsh population. They felt that being in care had given them more opportunities and they enjoyed activities and play. A third of young people had very high scores on the well-being scales used by the ONS to measure subjective well-being: a higher proportion of young people with very high scores compared to young people in the general population.

Whilst a third of looked after young were feeling very positive about their lives, about 18% of young people (11-18yrs) had very low scores - again a higher proportion than young people in the general population. The individual reports provided for each of the local authorities indicated where they needed to focus their attention to improve well-being for their care population.

Appearance

The factor having the strongest statistical effect on subjective well-being was young people's feelings about their appearance. The finding replicates The Children's Society surveys of young people in the general population⁴⁷ but the effect on well-being of disliking appearance was even more pronounced in the looked after population. When examined by gender 31% of looked after girls compared to 6% boys were unhappy about the way they looked. Social workers and statutory reviews should consider this area of development and work with young people to boost their self-esteem.



19% of looked after young people disliked their appearance, compared to 10% of young people in the general population.

⁴⁷ The Children's Society (2016) *The Good Childhood Report*. London

Family time



Contact plans need to be regularly reviewed, as many children and young people wanted changes.

Enabling contact with siblings placed outside Wales should be part of contact plans, as should consideration of independent visitors for the 19% of young people (11-18yrs) and 15% of children (8-10yrs) with no contact with either parent.

Siblings

We have wondered if the negative response might be due to sibling conflict for those in the same foster placement. Sibling conflict is at its peak during middle childhood and normally reduces during adolescence. Whilst sibling conflict is common and normative, it is also important to recognise that when sibling relationships do not also include intimacy, love, and warmth, the conflict can be harmful. For example, sibling bullying is the most frequent form of bullying but often goes unrecognised or is minimised, although the detrimental effects on children's development are well known.⁴⁸ Therefore, if children are expressing dislike or fear of a sibling, social workers might need to consider interventions that enable siblings to learn the skills that are necessary for normal sibling relationships: skills they may not have learnt in their birth families.⁴⁹ Siblings growing up with domestic violence may have learnt unhelpful ways of dealing with conflict.



As in England, 15% of children (8-10yrs) felt they were having too much contact with siblings.

⁴⁸ Wolke, D., Tippet, N., & Dantchev, S. (2015). *Bullying in the family: sibling bullying*. The Lancet Psychiatry, 2, 917-29. Perkins, N., & Stoll, A. (2016). Practical considerations of physical and emotional sibling violence in foster families: A summary of the current literature. *Journal of Family Social Work*, 19, 407-419.

⁴⁹ See for example Linares, L. O., Jimenez, J., Nesci, C., Pearson, E., Beller, S., Edwards, N., & Levin-Rector, A. (2014). Reducing sibling conflict in maltreated children placed in foster homes. *Prevention Science*, 39:1-10. doi:10.1007/s11121-014-0476-0.

Kothari B., McBeath B., Sorenson P., Bank L., Waid J., Webb S., & Steele J (2017) An intervention to improve sibling relationship quality among youth in foster care: Results of a randomized clinical trial. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 63, 19-29. doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2016.11.010

Friendships

Having a good friend is important for all children and become particularly important during adolescence. Lack of a good friend was associated with disliking school and therefore schools and social workers need to help children and young people become more socially skilled and build friendships.



One in ten looked after young people (11-18yrs) did not have a good friend.

Explaining and involving young people in decisions



1 In 5 young people struggled to get in touch with their social workers and the same proportion of 8-10 year olds did not feel listened to and included.

Between 17% (11-18yrs) and 20% (8-10yrs) did not feel listened to and included in social workers decisions and many comments focused on involvement in decision-making. 19% of young people found it difficult to contact workers and some felt that they were not listened to or that promises were broken. Children and young people wanted local authorities to re-examine decisions and policies that felt restrictive and prevented them from doing the same as friends. Some of these restrictions are likely to relate to safeguarding concerns, but it was clear from the comments that the reasons were not understood. Social workers need to spend more time explaining the reasons for decisions and, where possible, including all children (irrespective of age) in the discussions. Sometimes that may mean having 'difficult conversations' as professional's avoidance or thinking that the child is too young leaves children and young people with unanswered questions and may lead to them blaming themselves.

Explaining why children are in care

The findings also show the importance of ensuring 'difficult conversations' are had with children about the reasons why they are in care in an age appropriate way. The review process should include more attention on ensuring everyone understands why they are in care and the roles of adults in the system. A third of the youngest children (4-7yrs) felt no-one had explained why they were in care and a quarter did not know who their social worker was.



A third of the youngest children (4-7yrs) felt no one had explained why they were in care

Stability of placements and workers



Placement moves were statistically associated with lower well-being as was not having a consistent and reliable social worker.

Stability was important for children and young people. Unsurprisingly, placement moves were statistically associated with lower well-being, as was not having a consistent and reliable social worker. A quarter of young people recorded that they had had three or more social workers in the previous year and multiple changes of worker was statistically associated with lack of trust in the worker. Children and young people wrote many comments about being able to trust and being trusted by others.

Home environment

Children also highlighted the importance of their home environment. Some compared the warmth they were experiencing in their placements to their experiences within their families. Some children wrote about how they did not like “loud voices” or “shouting” – for most children this was not present in their placement, but a few of the younger children wrote that they were frightened by carers who shouted. The training of foster carers should include much more on therapeutic parenting and the development of skills in reflective functioning. Carers need the capacity to reflect on how their behaviour might be perceived by children who have been maltreated and be able put themselves in the child’s shoes to think about what the child may be thinking and feeling. As part of delivering foster or residential care, staff and carers need to develop their curiosity, as to why children might be behaving as they do.



Some children wrote about how they did not like “loud voices” or “shouting”

Future Bright Spots surveys

bright spots

Despite short timescales the local authorities responded well to the survey process and the average response rate was very good, although it was disappointing in one smaller local authority, limiting the analysis of the findings in that area. Yet more lead in time is needed in the future to engage local authorities, get buy in and plan survey distribution, especially if working with a larger number of local authorities. It will also be important to consider how the surveys for looked after children fit with wider cycles of well-being surveys being conducted with children and

young people in Wales as a whole by the Welsh Government, to avoid children feeling over-surveyed. Several local authorities commented that if choosing between the surveys they felt the Bright Spots survey had more relevant questions for children in care.

Overall, local authorities clearly appreciated the findings and all wanted to repeat the survey. They were keen to get clarity on future roll out and funding of the survey in Wales. There was also interest in conducting the newly developed care leaver survey 'Your Life Beyond Care' from at least one local authority. This new survey complements the findings collected through the 'Your Life, Your Care' to give a full picture of the children and young people that each local authority parents.



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About Bright Spots

This research is part of the Bright Spots programme: a partnership between the University of Bristol and Coram Voice. The programme was originally developed in England with funding from the Hadley Trust.

Bright Spots in Wales is a pilot with six local authorities funded by the Children's Commissioner for Wales & Welsh Government through the work of the Improving Outcomes for Children Ministerial Advisory Group to measure looked after children's subjective well-being – how they feel about their lives and their care.