



From Surviving to Thriving

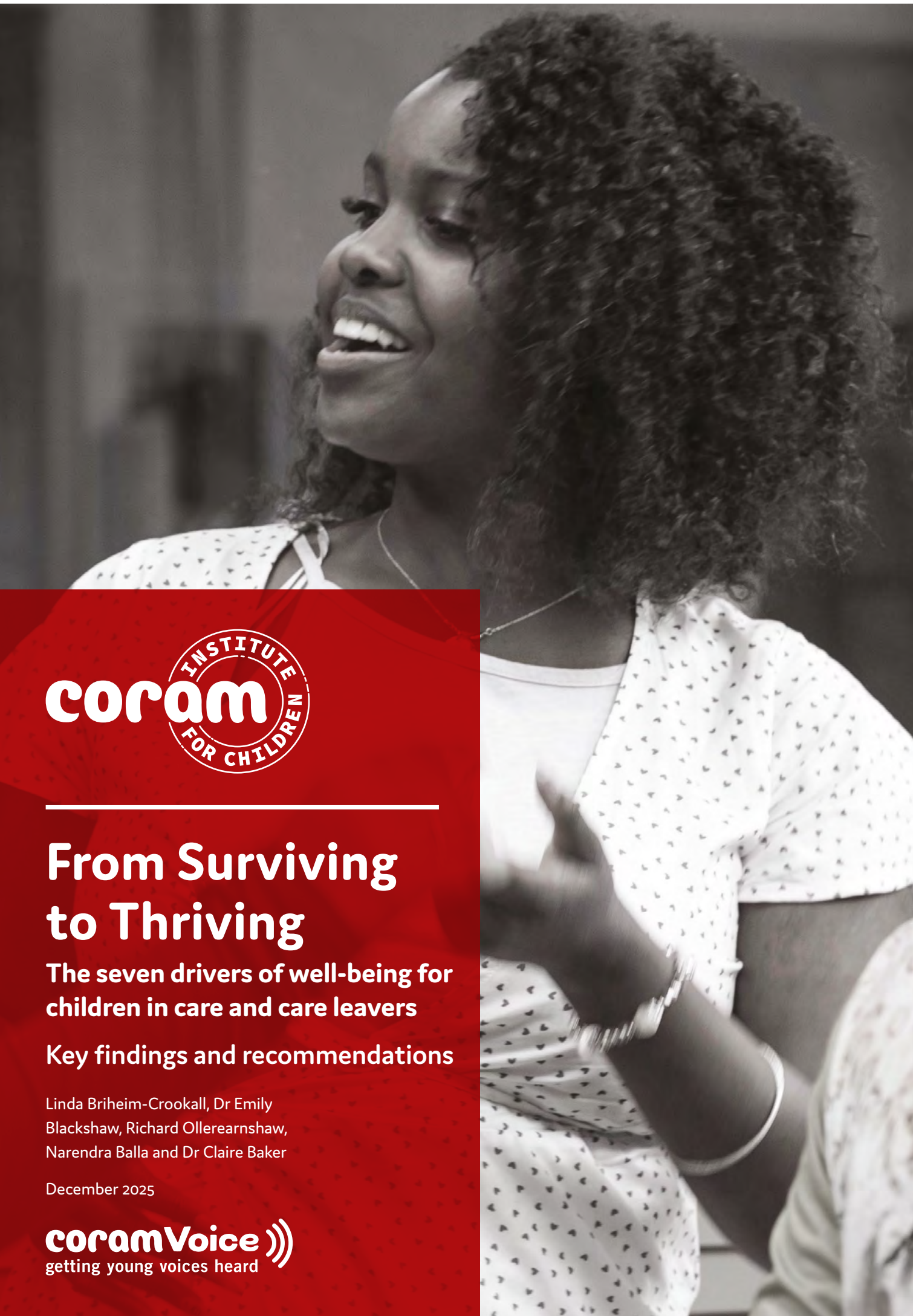
**The seven drivers of well-being for
children in care and care leavers**

Key findings and recommendations

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December 2025

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getting young voices heard





Acknowledgements

Thank you to all those who helped make this work possible:

- The Hadley Trust, whose generous funding enabled us to produce this report.
- Our care experienced consultants – Alfie, Chloe, Valerie, Jamie, Ed, Thaiquan and Jade – the young people who brought their lived experience of care to help us explore the findings and how best to present them.
- Professor Julie Selwyn, University of Oxford, who developed the Bright Spots programme with Coram Voice and provided helpful advice and feedback on early findings.
- All the local authorities who have partnered with Coram Voice for their commitment to engaging with and listening to their children and young people, helping us amplify the voices of young people nationally through reports such as this.
- The children and young people who responded to the Bright Spots surveys over the last 10 years giving us a rich insight into their lives, sharing their thoughts, hopes and worries.

A note on language

The care system is full of acronyms and terminology that can feel alien to children and young people who already face being treated differently because of their care experience. Coram Voice care experienced consultants (young people aged 16–25 with lived experience of care who support our work through paid opportunities) helped review the language in this report.

Language matters: we have tried to avoid terms like *placement* (using *home* instead) and *contact* (using *time with family*), though some terms remain for clarity. We know some young people question phrases like *care leaver*, feeling they did not leave care, but that care left them. Our consultants raised this point, and we considered alternatives.

The Bright Spots surveys focus on children and young people in care and those supported by leaving care services—a specific group often referred to as *children in care* and *care leavers*. We avoided *looked after children* because of negative associations with its acronym but retained *children in care* and *care leavers* for accuracy. We did not use *care experienced children and young people* as this includes a wider group, such as those who have returned home or been adopted, which is beyond the current Bright Spots programme. However, exploring their well-being in future would be valuable and we will look to take this forward as part of the research strategy of the Coram Institute for Children.

Safeguarding and trigger warning

Throughout this report, we have used children and young people's own words to reflect their experiences. Some of what they share is upsetting and highlights difficult moments in their lives. The Bright Spots team is very mindful of this when conducting the surveys. We brief the adults who support children and young people on how to respond if concerns arise. We also signpost all survey respondents to sources of advice and support should they need it. The Bright Spots team reviews all responses and flags any safeguarding concerns to the relevant local authority.

1 Foreword

"Well-being is something everyone talks about. For care experienced people, it is not just about feeling happy, it is about having stability, safety, and people who listen. Growing up in care, I learned early on how to survive, not how to feel. There were times I had to hide my emotions just to get through the day.

That is why it is so important we talk about well-being for care experienced young people. Conversations like this remind us that we are not alone and that it is okay to put our well-being first. It is a way to break the silence that the system sometimes leaves us with, and to start changing how care is seen and delivered.

Talking about well-being helps build spaces where honesty and hope can exist side by side. It gives people like me the chance to show that even after everything, we can still grow, heal, and make a difference.

Well-being matters, because people in care deserve more than survival, we deserve to live a normal life!"

Alfie-James Waring; Care Experienced Consultant

Contents

Acknowledgements	2
1 Foreword	3
2 Overview	4
Well-being matters	5
Understanding well-being for children in care and care leavers	5
Personal well-being questions	5
High well-being is achieved, but many still struggle	6
3 Key well-being findings	6
Leaving care is associated with lower well-being	7
10 year view of well-being	8
Certain factors are particularly important to well-being	10
Children in care: 4-10 year-olds	10
Children in care: 11-18 year-olds	10
Care leavers: 16-25 year-olds	11
4 The seven drivers of well-being	12
Emotional and mental health support	14
Family and friends	16
Trusted and supportive carers	18
Feeling safe and at home	20
Known and trusted workers	23
Involved and informed	24
Opportunities to learn and grow	26
5 Personal characteristics and circumstances	28
Happiness with how you look	29
6 Conclusion and recommendations	30
Areas for future research	31
Recommendations to move from surviving to thriving	32
8 References	34

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2 Overview

Over 10 years, the Bright Spots programme has been an important part of our work making sure young voices are heard and inform decision-making. By capturing how children and young people themselves feel about their lives and informing both local and national policy.



This report is produced by the Coram Institute for Children, the first Independent Research Organisation dedicated to children to mark the 50th anniversary of Coram Voice as the leading national charity for the voice of the child in care and care leavers.

Developed in partnership with Professor Julie Selwyn at the University of Oxford, the Bright Spots surveys were co-produced with children and young people to measure what they felt made their lives good and has been made possible by The Hadley Trust.

To date the *Your Life Your Care* (for children in care) and *Your Life Beyond Care* surveys (for care leavers) have heard from thousands of children and young people aged between four and 25 and over. This report draws on 27,000 of those responses from across more than 70 local authorities gathered between 2015-2024, with a particular focus on the most recent data from 2021-24 (11,104 responses).

This is not a study of care system outcomes, which are reported in government data such as educational attainment. Nor is it a commentary on child protection priorities that led to children and young people entering care. Instead, this study is distinctive for its explicit focus on the views of children and young people—what matters most to them in their lives—its scale relative to the numbers in and leaving care, and its perspective over ten years.

This 'Key findings and Recommendations' report summarises what we found. The words of the children and young people who responded to the surveys are shared in the quotes throughout this report to give a deeper understanding of their experience and what matter to their well-being.

More in depth analysis and methodology can be found in our full report and technical appendix. There is also a visual summary of findings and a brief executive summary.

To access all go to:
www.coramvoice.org.uk/fromsurvivingtothriving

Well-being matters

Over the past decade the Bright Spots programme has argued for a greater focus on children's well-being and for policy and practice to be informed by how children in care and care leavers feel about their lives. We have built on insights from across the globe that emphasise the need to understand lived experience and well-being (Wellbeing Economy Alliance, 2017; OECD, 2018)

Well-being is not simply a 'nice extra', it has important consequences for individual life chances including positive health, education and employment outcomes (WHO, 2020; Bevan, 2010; Steptoe et al., 2015; Suldo et al., 2015; Layard et al., 2014; LSE, 2015). By prioritising well-being, we can create conditions where both children and adults can thrive and the cumulative findings from the Bright Spots programme reinforces its importance.

"I'm able to function but I'd like to do more than function I'd like to thrive. I want to get to where I want to be but often obstacles that are near impossible stop me which is very difficult".

(Care leaver, Bright spots survey)

Placing subjective well-being at the centre of children's social care policy and practice allows for a more meaningful assessment of success: whether services genuinely improve the daily lives of children in care and care leavers. Yet current official outcome measures are incomplete, using objective data and adult assessment (e.g. educational attainment levels or suitability of accommodation for care leavers) rather than children and young people's views (e.g. do they like school or feel safe and settled where they live). This is the data gap that the Bright Spots programme has sought to fill.



27,000 young people have responded to Bright Spots surveys over 10 years

Understanding well-being for children in care and care leavers

The Bright Spots surveys focus on what children in care and care leavers say makes their lives better. By co-creating the Bright Spots indicators with children and young people and validating the survey tools, we know that all the questions asked in the Bright Spots surveys are important to children and young people's well-being.

A clear understanding of the drivers of well-being, and focused attention on them, is essential to enable children in care and care leavers to thrive. Having collected thousands of survey responses from children, we can apply statistical methods and further analysis of children and young people's written comments to identify the factors most strongly associated with higher and lower well-being for children in care and care leavers. We are also able to look at how responses have changed over time. This report, produced under Coram Institute for Children, the first recognised Independent Research Organisation dedicated to children and young people, updates earlier Bright Spots research (Selwyn & Briheim-Crookall, 2022; Briheim-Crookall et al., 2020) and identifies what the most important drivers of well-being are for children in care and care leavers.

The analysis includes:

- Statistical analysis of responses from 2021-2024 (n=11,104) including logistic regression to identify what factors increase the odds of very high or low well-being.
- Comparing 2021-24 results to findings from 2017-2020 (n=9,675)
- Analysis of over 100,000 written comments using a closed AI system and Coram researchers.
- Workshops with seven care experienced consultants that explored key themes and how to present findings.

Personal well-being questions

The Office for National Statistics (ONS), that publishes statistics on children and young people's well-being nationally (ONS, 2024a), measures personal well-being using four questions rated from 0 to 10 exploring: life satisfaction, whether the things you do in life are worthwhile, happiness yesterday, and anxiety yesterday. Children in care told us they did not like the anxiety question, so we ask them how positive they feel about the future instead. Low well-being is 0-4 or 6-10 for anxiety. For younger children (aged 4-11), we only ask how happy they felt yesterday, so our analysis explores what increases the odds of their feeling unhappy yesterday.

3 Key well-being findings

One of the most consistent findings from the Bright Spots programme throughout the years has been that a majority of children in care report that their lives are getting better bringing into stark relief the issues faced by those who are struggling.

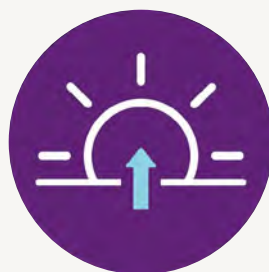


High well-being is achieved, but many still struggle

When the lived experience of children in care and care leavers is explored, there is often a focus on the challenges that they experience. However, Bright Spots data shows that low well-being is not inevitable, and many children and young people feel they are thriving in care. Around four in ten (39%) children in care (11-18) and a fifth (22%) of care leavers have very high well-being, rating themselves as 9 or 10 out of 10 on at least two of our four personal well-being measures.

"It [being in care] makes me better because of the food, the bed – it makes me happy because I have a better life"

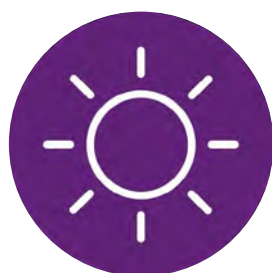
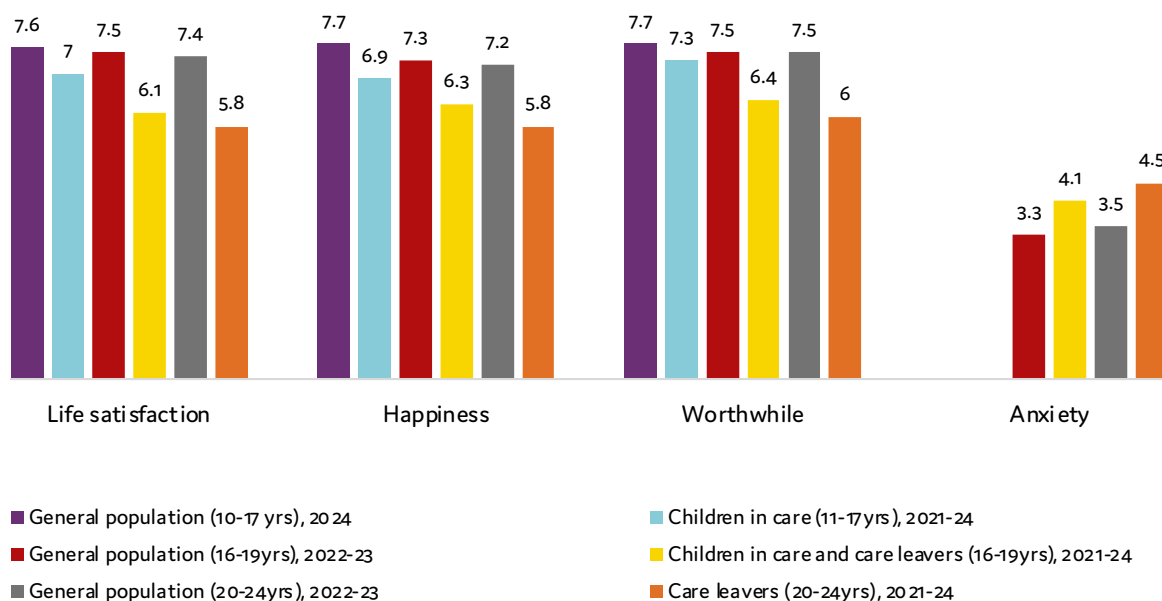
(4-7 year-old)



84% of children in care aged 8-18 report that their lives are getting better

But too many children and young people still struggle. Both children in care and care leavers have lower well-being than their peers in the general population, but the difference is larger for care leavers than for children in care (Figure 1). Across all age groups of children in care (aged 4-18) 9% have low well-being. Looking only at 11-18 year-olds 13% of have low well-being compared with 32% of care leavers.

Figure 1: Average well-being scores of children in care and care leavers compared with children and young people in the general population¹



2/5 teenagers in care and 1/5 care leavers have very high well-being

"I was scared when I first moved into care as I thought that when I first moved in I was going to hate it, but it is not that bad. I feel like I am included into the family as if I had always been a part of their life. being in care helped me realise that I am not useless and that my life actually has meaning to it."

(11-18 year-old)

Leaving care is associated with lower well-being

Well-being for children in care and care leavers decreases with age and there is a stark drop off in well-being for young people after they have left care (Figure 2).

"The connections I had made with all the people who helped me while in care was instantly cut off and I can't speak to anyone anymore - which I'm sure you know destroys all the work done helping me. I feel lonely, useless, unfulfilled and 'dumped at the side of the road'. It's as if I was simply on a conveyor that ended the day I turned 18, ready to pick up the next helpless child to repeat the cycle"

(Care leaver)

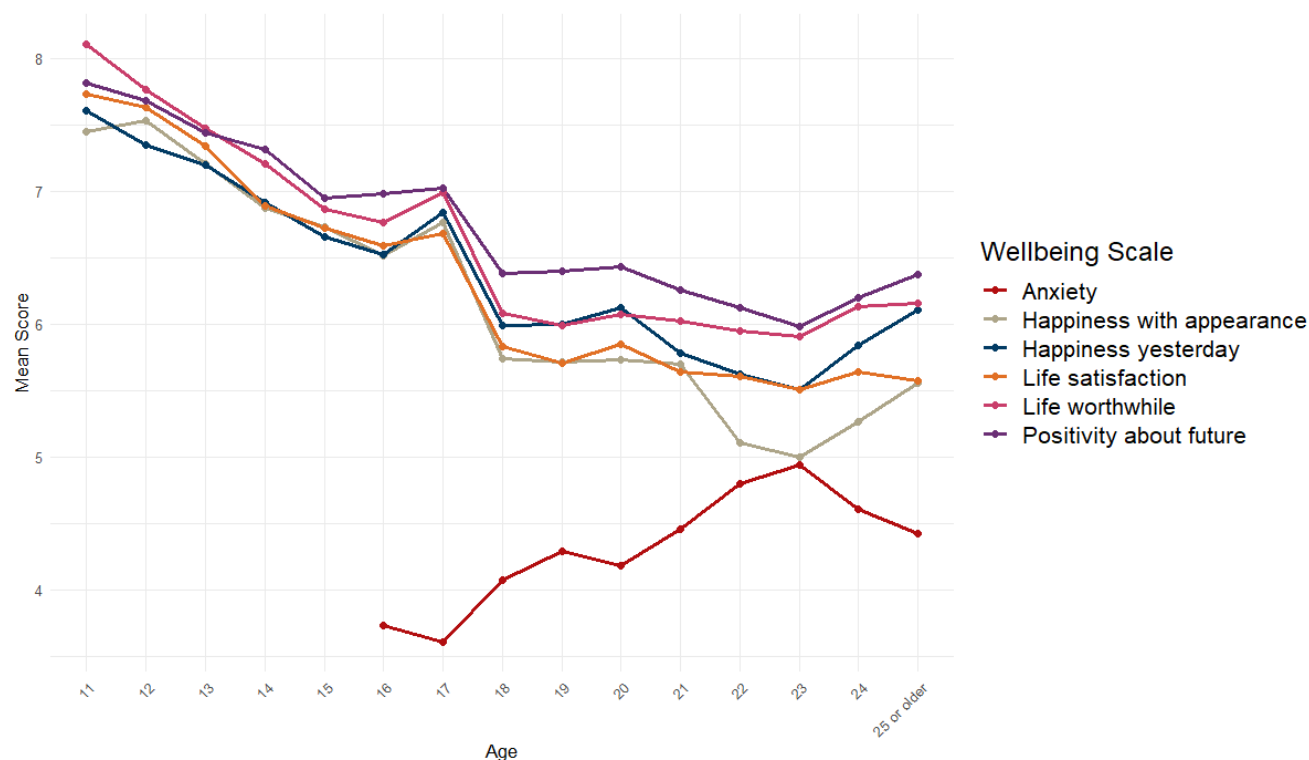
Life is getting better for most children in care but all too many care leavers feel they are surviving rather than thriving and this has to change.



Around 1 in 10 children in care and 1 in 3 care leavers have low well-being

¹ Source for general population data: 10-17 year-olds (The Children's Society, 2024), 16-24 year-olds (ONS, 2023)

Figure 2: Well-being scales by age for 2021-24



Young people commented on leaving care being marked in particular by the withdrawal of sources of supportive relationships they had come to rely on. In some cases, this left young people feeling alone and unsupported; some felt that they had no-one to go to.

"You are literally left to find yourself in the big bad world at the age of 16 years old with no help or support from the people who always said 'we're here to help' 'we only want to best for you' etc. More needs to be done for care leavers to ensure that they are fully ready and got the proper support plan behind them so that they don't feel abandoned all over all again!"

(Care leaver)

10 year view of well-being

It is particularly worrying that for care leavers, rates of well-being have dropped in recent years, with significantly lower overall well-being scores in 2021-24 (32% with low well-being) compared with 2017-20 (29%)¹. This reflects a decrease in life satisfaction and sense of purpose and increased levels of anxiety among care leavers.

Children in care and care leavers continue to have lower well-being than the general population and levels of low well-being among care leavers has increased over time.

We did not see the same trend among children in care for whom patterns of overall well-being scores are consistent between 2017-20, and 2021-24². 14% of children in care aged 11-18 years had low well-being in 2017-20, compared with 13% in 2021-24.


There is an urgent need to make the transition from care more gradual and prioritise the key elements that drive care leavers' well-being. With good preparation and planning and someone to turn to when life gets challenging, more young people will avoid the cliff edges in support.

"I have had quite a good experience leaving care. My problems were in care not the transition which was planned and positive."

(Care leaver)

¹ Pillai's Trace = 0.003, $F(4, 7,847) = 5.73$, $p < 0.001$

² Pillai's Trace = 0.0016, $F(4, 6,704) = 2.75$, $p = 0.03$, compared to Bonferroni corrected p value of $p = 0.001$.



"It is nice [in care] because
you get loved a lot."
(4-7 year-old)

Certain factors are particularly important to well-being

All the questions we explore in the Bright Spots surveys cover aspects children in care and care leavers told us makes their lives good. However, by using statistical analysis we can explore the areas that are most strongly linked to well-being. We used logistic regression models to explore factors that increased the odds of unhappiness and low/very high well-being among care-experienced children and young people.

Some survey questions could not be used in the analysis:

- For younger children, some questions were not asked consistently across age groups.
- For older children (11–18) and care leavers, some questions were left out because they were too closely linked to well-being itself.
- Some questions were excluded because they caused technical issues in the analysis, e.g. overlapping too much with other questions or having too many answer choices that could not be grouped easily.
- Age was treated differently in one model because the usual method did not work well.

Children in care: 4-10 year-olds

The youngest children are only asked one personal well-being question – how happy they were yesterday. This question on its own is not necessarily a measure of low well-being, as you could have a good life overall, but something happened that momentarily affected your happiness, such as falling out with a friend. However, looking at the factors associated with unhappiness gives us a sense of what is important to the youngest children's well-being.

The odds of being **unhappy yesterday** were higher for children in care (4-10 years) who:

- Did not feel safe at home – 2.56 times higher
- Did not like school – 2.49 times higher
- Did not have a good friend – 2.07 times higher
- Did not live with adults who notice how they are feeling – 1.87 times higher
- Did not know their social worker – 1.68 times higher
- Did not feel settled at home – 1.61 times higher

Children in care: 11-18 year-olds

The odds of having **low well-being** are higher for young people (aged 11-18 years) who:

- Are not happy with their appearance – 7.44 times higher
- Did not like school – 2.68 times higher
- Did not know that they can speak to their social worker on their own – 2.48 times higher
- Did not get an opportunity to show they can be trusted – 2.29 times higher
- Did not feel settled at home – 2.20 times higher
- Did not feel involved in decisions – 2.13 times higher
- Do not have an adult that they trust – 1.96 times higher
- Were female – 1.86 times higher
- Talked to their carers infrequently – 1.78 times higher
- Did not trust their carer – 1.78 times higher
- Had been in care for less than one year – 1.54 times higher
- Did not feel safe at home – 1.53 times higher
- Had more than one placement or didn't know how many placements they had – 1.48 times higher
- Did not often get outdoors in nature – 1.47 times higher
- Felt that their contact arrangements with their siblings were wrong – 1.45 times higher
- Were older – 1.14 times higher for each year in age

The odds of having **very high well-being** were higher for young people (aged 11-18 years) who:

- Were happy with their appearance – 6.89 times higher
- Felt safe at home – 2.70 times higher
- Felt settled at home – 2.66 times higher
- Like school – 2.24 times higher
- Trust their social worker – 2.15 times higher
- Have a good friend – 2.06 times higher
- Regularly talk to their carers – 1.95 times higher
- Know who their social worker is – 1.96 times higher
- Were younger (11-14 years) – 1.51 times higher
- Were male – 1.40 times higher
- Did not feel afraid to go to school due to bullying – 1.38 times higher
- Were White – 1.25 times higher

"I do not want to change foster home since this is the closest thing I've ever had to a proper family and moving would most certainly ruin my life."

(11-18 year-old)

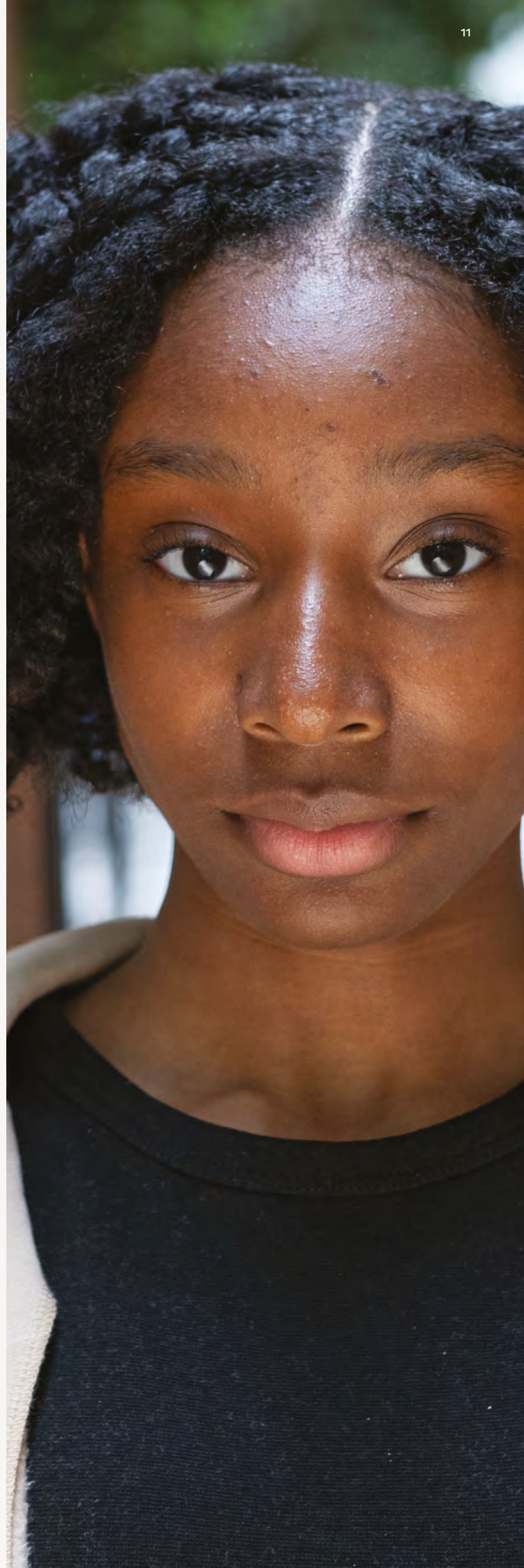
Care leavers: 16-25 year-olds

The odds of having **low well-being** were higher for care leavers who:

- Were unhappy with their appearance – 4.11 times higher
- Were lonely – 3.12 times higher
- Were finding things difficult financially – 2.28 times higher
- Did not have someone who believed they will be a success – 1.82 times higher
- Who were not parents – 1.82 times higher
- Did not feel safe in their neighbourhood – 1.63 times higher
- Who were disabled – 1.58 times higher
- Did not feel safe at home – 1.54 times higher
- Did not feel where they lived was right for them – 1.43 times higher
- Were not in employment, education, or training – 1.30 times higher
- Were not involved in their pathway planning – 1.29 times higher
- Who were White – 1.26 times higher
- Did not trust their leaving care worker – 1.23 times higher
- Had either two or more, or no leaving care worker – 1.20 times higher

The odds of having **very high well-being** were higher for care leavers who:

- Were happy with their appearance – 4.20 times higher
- Felt safe at home – 2.83 times higher
- Were not lonely – 2.06 times higher
- Were comfortable financially – 1.96 times higher
- Were parents – 1.87 times higher
- Were involved in their pathway planning – 1.51 times higher
- Were in education, employment, or training – 1.25 times higher
- Were not disabled – 1.24 times higher



4 The seven drivers of well-being

By applying a well-being lens, we can begin to see what supports a good life for children in care and care leavers. We found that the key drivers of well-being can be grouped into seven areas:






1. Emotional and mental health support
2. Family and friends
3. Trusted and supportive carers
4. Known and trusted workers
5. Feel safe and at home
6. Involved and informed
7. Opportunities to learn and grow

As children and young people grow older their understanding and circumstances change - and the Bright Spots surveys reflect that. Some questions are asked across all surveys, while others are tailored to older children in care or care leavers. This affects which factors show up in our analysis as important for each group. In our visual summary of the drivers of well-being below, we use white circles to show factors that affect children in care, and green circles for care leavers. Yellow circles are drivers which are important to all children and young people. In the following sections we explore each of these drivers of well-being.

Figure 3: Visualisation of the seven drivers of well-being



Key

-  Children in care
-  Care Leavers (CL)
-  Children in care & care leavers

Emotional and mental health support

Mental health and well-being are closely related, but they're not the same thing. The Bright Spots survey is primarily a well-being survey, but mental health issues were highlighted in both written responses and quantitative data.



6 out of 10 children in care worried about their feelings and behaviour

It was clear from the analysis of children and young people's comments that emotional and mental health support was very important to both children in care and care leavers. Our care experienced consultants reflected that mental health support was integral to many of the other drivers of well-being.

"If you don't have a trusted adult, your mental health will dip. If you don't have the right funding, your mental health will dip. If you are not involved and informed in your life, your mental health will dip."

(Care experienced consultant)

Who you get emotional and mental health support from differs for each child. But what appeared important to all was having people who were there for them.

"My foster carer helps me with my big feels. I have started therapy and learnt I'm good, sometimes make not so good choices."

(8-11 year-old)

In general, some young people wanted more support with their mental health. Young people described being turned away or facing long waiting lists to access support. They wanted more opportunity to talk about their mental health and access to specialist mental health support. There was also a need for increased staff awareness of issues affecting specific groups of children and young people such as transgender young people, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children or new parents.

"I suffer with depression and anxiety... I have tried seeking help, but they all come back saying they can't help... I think there should be more support around mental health for care leavers because we didn't ask to have the childhood we had."

(Care leaver)

For children in care a trusted adult was important, whereas for care leavers not being lonely and having someone who believes in you was linked to well-being. It is particularly worrying that a proportion of care leavers report they have no one that provides them with emotional support.



6% of care leavers have no one who provides them with emotional support

"I struggle to sustain relationships due to my mental health, I am often alone and feel as though I have nobody around me or supporting me. It's hard to explain to others."

(Care leaver)

Our analysis showed the odds of low well-being was almost two times higher for children in care who did not have a trusted adult and care leavers who did not have someone who believed they would be a success. Overall, 94% of children in care (8-18) report that they have 'an adult that they can trust, who helps them and sticks by them no matter what'. The percentage was highest among those children who lived with foster carers (95%), kinship carers (95%) or parents (96%) and lowest among children in residential (89%) and other accommodation (81%).



1 in 5 children in care who live in 'other accommodation' (mostly supported accommodation) did not have a trusted adult

The percentage who had someone they could trust and rely on declined by age – 85% of care leavers had a person they could trust. Care leavers who were disabled were significantly³ less likely to have someone who believes in them (82%) compared with care leavers who did not self-report disability or long-term health problems (91%).

"I feel alone and at a time which I should be supported and encouraged about my future I feel let down and disappointed."

(Care leaver)



1 in 8 care leavers report not having someone who believes in them. For care leavers with a disability this is almost 1 in 5.

We do not ask children in care about loneliness, but care leavers who were not lonely had greater odds of very high well-being. Care leavers with a disability or long term health condition had particularly high levels of loneliness (29% lonely often/always) compared with care leavers without a disability (15%).



1 in 5 Care leavers feel lonely often or always compared to 1 in 12 in the general population

"I struggle a lot with self-doubt, social anxiety, and having the confidence to form genuine, intimate connections which causes me to feel emotionally lonely."

(Care leaver)

In our analysis, children in care who had regular access to the outdoors, places like parks, beaches or woods, had increased odds of high well-being.

In the general population 5% of 8-15 year-olds never spend time outdoors (Natural England, 2023), but for children in care the same age 9% did not spend time outdoors⁴.

"[What would make care better?] Going to different places more often like the beach."

(8-11 year-old)



Teenagers in care who did not often get outdoors⁵ had 1.5 higher odds of low well-being.

3 $^2(1, 4,359) = 25.47, p < 0.001$

4 Answer options for different age groups are different. This includes those that answered 'never' or 'not at all'

5 For 11-18 year-olds we grouped once a week and not at all, vs every day and more than once a week

Family and friends

Trusting and supportive relationships are essential for children in care and care leavers. While professionals play a vital role, family and friends are not paid to be there—they choose to be. They offer opportunities for shared experiences now, and a connection that can last well into adulthood.

The care experienced consultants who helped us explore the data grouped trusted relationships into three groups – family, friends and professionals. To them, family referred to lots of different types of relationships, including foster carers. Our care experienced consultants noted that seemingly incidental relationships can be important – e.g. a taxi driver that takes you to school each day or a sports coach – this underscores the need to listen carefully and ask children about who they say is important to them.

“They are all amazing especially my two best friends (one of which is a care leaver). They both support me, believe in me and are always there.”

(Care leaver)

Friendships play a central role in children’s development and are consistently identified as a key driver of emotional well-being and identity formation. They offer vital opportunities for learning empathy, managing conflict, fun and building self-worth. (Charfe & Eichsteller, 2025).



1 in 8 children in care and care leavers don’t have a good friend.

Overall, 12% of children and young people (aged 4-25+) reported that they did not have a good friend. In the general population 2% of 16-24 year-olds (YouGov, 2021) and 4% of 10-15 year-olds (The Children’s Society, 2020) do not have a good friend. This compares to 15% of 16-24 year-olds 9% of 10-15 year-olds in our survey.

Some children and young people shared that frequent moves and rules and restrictions such as the need for social worker approval to visit friends can impact their friendships and limit opportunities to do similar things to their friends. They asked for more opportunities to make friends, including activities with other care experienced children and young people who understood their experiences.

“Being in care is hard for me as I am in my last year of primary school and I don’t get to hang out with my friends without having to ask my social worker.”

(8-11 year-old)

“The care system made sure I couldn’t have any relationships. You took me away from my family and friends aged 13 and shipped me all across the country, from farms in [Place] to literal tents in [Place]. I wasn’t allowed to go to school, so I was completely isolated with no phone either - for 4 years. At 17 I then got dropped in semi-independent in [Place]. I don’t know anyone. I’m so lonely because of care.”

(Care leaver)

One of the most common things that children and young people comment on in the surveys is their views on how much they see their families. More detailed analysis is available in Lewis and Selwyn (2022). Family can encompass parents, brothers and sisters, but also extended family members (such as cousins and grandparents). In their written comments children and young people often had clear and specific ideas about who they would like to see, not see or see more of.

“I want to see my mum more because I want to spend time with her. And spend time with my brothers, cousins and nieces. I never see my dad and I don’t know why. I miss my dad. He said he put my presents to the social worker and it never came.”

(8-11 year-old)

Our statistical analysis found that being unhappy with how often you saw your brothers and sisters increased the odds of low well-being for children in care.



Around half of children in foster or kinship placements feel they see their brothers and sisters the 'right' amount compared with less than a third of children in residential and other accommodation

[What would make care better?] "If my brother and sister can come over for a sleepover with me, and if we could sometimes go out to the park together"

(4-7 year-old)

Although many young people wrote about wanting to see their siblings more, there were also those who felt they saw their brother(s) or sister(s) too much (e.g. If they lived together). The key factor was whether children in care themselves feel they see them the 'right' amount for them.



A quarter of children in care feel they see their brothers and sisters too little

"I wish that I could see my mum and brother, my family mean the world to me I feel cold all of the time without them in my life anymore."

(11-18 year-old)



2 in 5 children in residential care feel they see their brothers and sisters too little

Around a fifth of care leavers were either parents, or they or their partners were pregnant. Many of these care leavers (30%) reported that their children were a source of emotional support. Care leavers who were parents reported higher well-being than those who did not have children.



The odds of high well-being were almost two times higher for care leavers who were parents than those who were not.

"My son is, and always will be, the reason I try my best in all I do. He has saved and changed my life in so many ways and it's because of him I now love life and face every challenge with a smile."

(Care leaver)



Trusted and supportive carers

"Nothing would make being in care better for me. For all those going into care they need to find the right person because if they do not find the right person, they won't live a happy life, and we want everyone in care to live a happy life".

(8-11 year-old)

For children in care, although the state is their 'corporate parent' it is the adults that they live with that take on the role of day-to-day parenting. Whether they are foster carers, kinship carers, residential care workers or key workers in supported accommodation, our findings showed how important trusted and supportive relationships with the adults they live with are to children in care.



96% of children in care trust their carers at least some of the time

"I think being in care has changed my life massively and has helped improve my mental health by a huge amount as I feel a lot more loved and I don't feel as useless as I used to. I believe that by having a really close bond with my foster carer I feel like I have someone there to help me and listen to what I have to say".

(11-18 year-old)

Our analysis showed that teenagers in care who did not trust their carers had higher odds of low well-being. Supportive relationships were those where children in care felt seen and heard by the adults that they lived with.

"My foster carers are the best! They help us with our emotions all the time if I am worried or if they tell by my face and expression towards things. They care about me a lot and they love me. They help me to understand why being in foster care is important, and we have little chats about it when the time is right."

(8-11 year-old)

Children who had a positive relationship with carers described carers' attention to their feelings, knowing their likes and dislikes. They described how adults they lived with would listen to them and allowed them to talk freely and openly. Others who had negative experiences wrote about carers who shouted or did not provide a safe space for them to talk about their feelings.

"I would like to change to a nicer foster carer... I don't feel I can talk to my foster carer about my worries or if I'm upset as she is always on the phone."

(8-11 year-old)

For younger children having their feelings noticed by the adults they lived with was linked to higher happiness, whereas teenagers who talked to adults they lived with about the things that mattered to them had higher well-being.



Two thirds of 8 year-olds report that their carers notice how they are feeling all or most of the time compared with just over half of 17 year-olds

11-18 year-olds that regularly talked to carers about the things that matters to them had two times greater odds of very high well-being and similarly feeling that they could not talk to carers increased the chance of low well-being 1.8 times.



Two thirds of young people in care talk to the adults they live with about things that are important to them at least once a week

"I feel like a lot of my problems are a result of my mental instability. Unfortunately I do not know where to turn to talk about my feelings... Talking to my foster parent is difficult as I am scared that she will be angry at me for feeling this way or think that I am ungrateful, I feel like she doesn't really understand me. She often says I have no real problems to be worrying about which is far from the truth. She calls me childish and sometimes I even have my phone confiscated if I am in a bad mood e.g. I'm not smiling and I feel like crying. That leaves me with only my friends that I can speak to. I feel like my foster mother should understand me, she is a mental health nurse after all but this isn't the case. I do not want to change foster home since this is the closest thing I've ever had to a proper family and moving would most certainly ruin my life."

(11-18 year-old)

Our data show that while some relationships last, some may weaken in adulthood. More care leavers feel their pets provide emotional support (18%) than those who feel former foster carers do (17%).



Fewer care leavers reported that their foster carers provided them with emotional support in 2021-24 (17%) than in 2017-20 (25%)

Worryingly, a significantly⁶ lower proportion of care leavers report their foster carers provide them with emotional support in recent years than previously (17% in 2021-24 compared with 25% in 2017-20). This is not necessarily a reflection of a decline in the relationship with individual carers but could be explained by a reduction in young people who have foster carers, i.e. more young people living only in residential or supported accommodation before they leave care. DfE data shows that in England the proportion of care leavers who are living with carers when they turn 18 and eligible for Staying Put has declined from 32% in 2018 to 28% in 2024 (DfE, 2024 & 2021).

Bright Spots surveys do not ask care leavers about where they lived while in care so it is not possible to identify to analyse whether this made a difference. However, what our findings suggest is that young people who may have benefited from strong relationships with carers are not developing these. This does not only have implications for their time in care but impacts on their support networks in early adulthood.

Staying Put in England and equivalent schemes (*When I am ready*, Wales; Continuing Care, Scotland) did appear to make a difference to care leavers. Three out of five care leavers (60%) who were still living with their foster carers aged 18 or older (Staying Put) felt their carers provided emotional support, compared with 12% of all other care leavers.

"My ex foster carers who I live with are really lovely – they encourage me in everything I do".

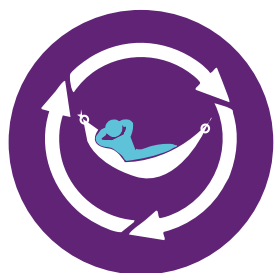
(Care leaver)



Feeling safe and at home

A stable home plays a key role for children and young people as they grow up, including during their move into adulthood. Our findings show the importance of feeling safe and at home where you live.

Children in care who lived in family-based placements (foster care, kinship foster care & parents) had higher well-being than those in residential care or 'other' forms of placements (mostly supported accommodation).



Around two thirds of children in foster care or living with family had high life satisfaction compared to less than half of children in residential or other accommodation.

Care leavers who lived with former carers, parents or in supported lodgings also reported higher well-being. Lower well-being was reported by care leavers that were homeless or lived in temporary or emergency accommodation.



Care leavers who were 'Staying Put' (living with former foster carers) scored highest on all well-being measures.

It is important to note that how children feel about where they live is important to well-being, but that a child in a particular home has lower well-being is not necessarily linked to the quality of that home. There may be more specialist homes catering to higher needs who would have children with low well-being but are doing a good job stabilising and improving their lives. We also know that age is relevant to well-being and some homes are more common for older children in care.

Our data, as an anonymous snapshot, does not allow us to unpick things like children and young people's progress over time. However, future analysis of the Bright Spots data exploring the experience of children and young people in different accommodation, in particular older children in care (aged 16-17), would be beneficial.

Feeling safe where you live stood out as the one factor consistently linked to well-being across all age groups. Its presence supports high well-being, while its absence increases the risk of low well-being.

"Being in care is better than living with my parents because I feel safe being in care and I live with nice people that I can talk to."

(11-18 year-old)

Unfortunately, care experienced children and young people felt significantly less safe⁷ in recent years, compared with earlier years.



76% of children and young people always felt safe at home in 2021-24 compared with 80% in 2017-20.

Further analysis and research are needed to understand why there has been a decline in the proportion of children feeling safe. Children and young people who felt less safe included girls, children in residential care, care leavers in supported, emergency or short stay accommodation or those who had a disability or long-term health problem.



1 in 3 girls don't always feel safe where they live compared with 1 in 4 boys aged 11-18 years

Feeling safe where you live decreases as you get older. Significantly⁸ more children in care (8-18 years) always felt safe at home (87%), compared with care leavers (65%).

⁷ $\chi^2(1, 18,458) = 49.65, p < 0.001$

⁸ $\chi^2(1, 10,152) = 616.27, p < 0.001$



A third of care leavers do not always feel safe in their home.

In their written comments a few young people described serious safeguarding concerns where they had lived. They emphasised the importance of being listened to and taking action to tackle abuse and neglect. Other people they were living with could also influence how safe children and young people felt, including siblings or those they shared accommodation with. Comments from older young people included experience of antisocial behaviour, noisy neighbours, criminality, and drug use.

"I'm scared where I live there's 3 people I'm scared of."

(Care leaver)

Care leavers who felt unsafe in their neighbourhood also had a higher chance of low well-being.



1 in 10 care leavers never felt safe in their neighbourhood.

The Bright Spots surveys ask children if they feel settled where they live i.e. comfortable, accepted and at ease. To be settled is linked to a sense of belonging and stability.

"I love it. Like I enjoy living here, it's boosted my confidence... I adore my carers and I think my carers are a part of my family now. I feel more at home here than my last care home. They didn't really know me and there's more stuff to do here."

(11-18 year-old)

For children in care whether they felt settled was linked to well-being for all age groups, as did feeling that your home was right for you if you were a care leaver.



Less than half of children in residential care felt settled compared with three quarters of children living elsewhere.

Groups where fewer young people felt settled included girls and young women and care leavers with a disability or long term health condition. For children and young people in care aged 8-18 years, children and young people were significantly⁹ less likely to feel settled at home in residential care (49%) as opposed to all other living arrangements (77%). For care leavers, the highest rates of feeling settled are reported by those who were 'staying put' with their foster carer(s) (with the lowest reported by those who were homeless (10%) or in short stay/emergency accommodation (18%).



Fewer children and young people (aged 4-25+) felt settled in 2021-24 (64%) than in 2017-20 (71%)¹⁰

Relationship with carers is an important part of feeling settled and giving a sense of belonging. Many children and young people with positive relationship described carers as family.



⁹ $\chi^2(1, 4,877) = 224.55, p < 0.001$

¹⁰ $\chi^2(1, 20,484) = 107.14, p < 0.001$

Children who had moved between multiple homes in care also had lower well-being. Yet only a third of children in care (aged 11-18) had been in one home during their time in care. Children and young people's comments highlighted the importance of minimising moves and matching children and young people with the right home and giving opportunities to meet carers in advance. Some children and young people were worried that they would not be able to stay in their current homes or described a large number of moves and the impact these had on their well-being.

[What would make care better?] "Staying at my new home forever and painting and having baths."

(4-7 year-old)

"I went into a mental health hospital because I got kicked out so many times and although I know some were my fault and I'm responsible for some I am not responsible for all 43 places I've lived in"

(Care leaver)



69% of care leavers report that where they live is right for them, yet in official statistics, based on professional assessments of whether accommodation is right for young people, 88% of care leavers (aged 19-21) are deemed to be in suitable accommodation (DfE, 2024).



Government statistics suggest that around 9 in 10 care leavers are in suitable accommodation, yet only 7 in 10 care leavers report where they live is right for them

The highest proportion of care leavers (88%) who felt their home was right for them were those that were 'staying put' with their foster carers.

"It's a bit far from my friends and family and with my disabilities making it difficult for me to get around I don't always see people... Having pain conditions that make me need to use crutches sometimes is difficult when you have a maisonette because I can't get out as it's not safe to take the stairs. I have an overhead shower and it's hard to get into the bath without help."

(Care leaver)

In written comments, some care leavers expressed their satisfaction with where they were living. They appreciated having their own space, or a sense of security; they liked the area or living near people they cared about.

"It's a really nice council flat which is out of the way and has a nice view."

(Care leaver)

Those that were unhappy often had the opposite experience, they also described poor planning prior to moves, little choice and accommodation that was unsafe and in poor condition.

"When I turned 18, I had no say in where I moved too, and I was forced out into a horrible rat-infested s**t show. The repairs were never fixed. It took over a year to move."

(Care leaver)

Known and trusted workers

There are many professionals in the lives of care experienced children and young people. In our surveys we focus on social workers for children in care and the workers who provide throughcare, after care or leaving care support for care leavers. The latter are known as Personal Advisers (PAs) in England, but different terminology is used in Scotland and Wales. We have used workers as a shorthand for all these professionals.

Many young people were very positive about the support provided by their workers, whether social workers or leaving care workers/PAs.

As with carers, trust matters in children and young people's relationship with their workers. Trusting workers was associated with well-being for both children in care and care leavers. Three-quarters (75%) of 8-11 years olds in care, 60% of 11-18 year-olds in care, and 80% of care leavers trust their worker all or most of the time.

"I feel that I am really getting on with my current social worker and that I know that I can trust her and that she understands my views and feelings and that I can tell her everything."

(11-18 year-old)



4/5 care leavers trust their worker compared with 3/5 teenagers in care.

The odds of having very high well-being were over two times higher for young people (aged 11-18 years) who trust their social worker. Children and young people who described positive relationships had workers who were available to them, listened to them, got things done and did not judge them.

"I'll be leaving the leaving care teams soon, but I have had the most support from them since the day I came into care. My PA has really helped me and always been there for me and listened to my worries and concerns."

(Care leaver)

For care leavers personal advisers were the second most common source of emotional support, second only to friends. 45% of care leavers reported that their personal advisers (PA) gave them emotional support.

"[Name] has been very supportive through all the good times and the bad. She is always there when I need support or just a chat. I wouldn't be where I am now if it wasn't for her support throughout the past 2/3 years."

(Care leaver)

Yet, there has been a significant¹¹ decline in the proportion of care leavers who report that their PA was a source of emotional support. It has gone down from 51% in 2017-20 to 45% in 2021-24. This suggests a need to invest in this important relationship for care leavers, make changes to policy and practice that ensures more personal advisers have the time, remit and resources to get to know and be there for the young people they are responsible for. Frequent changes of workers and poor communication are not just administrative challenges that services deal with but have a real impact on how children and young people feel about their lives. Young people described how not being able to get hold of their workers or feeling that they did not do what they said they would do reduced their trust in workers.

"[What would make care better?] Speaking to social worker more often about my life."

(8-11 year-old)

Care leavers found it easier to contact their workers than children in care did.



Almost three quarters of care leavers felt their workers were easy to get in touch compared to just over half of children in care.

Simply knowing who their worker was, was associated with well-being for both children in care and care leavers. Overall, 92% of care experienced children and young people knew who their social or leaving care worker was.

Three fifths of care leavers had had the same worker in the last year and only two fifths of children in care did.

"I'm glad I've just had one worker because I would have found it difficult talking to someone new. If you possibly do it, just have one worker. It makes things much better for us."

(Care leaver)

For care leavers the odds of low well-being increased for those who did not have an allocated worker or whose workers had changed over the last year.

¹¹ $\chi^2(1, 8,228) = 26.60, p < 0.001$

Involved and informed

"When I am included I feel part of it and happy."

(11-18 year-old)

Our care experienced consultants when working on the Bright Spots findings analysis stressed the importance of being involved and informed in decisions about their lives and reflected that often children in care lack control over their lives. The comments of the children and young people surveyed suggested this was an important theme too.

"Social workers need to need to learn to listen to kids. Don't just go off what others say they need, but listen if the child says they need something else."

(Care leaver)

6% never felt involved of children and young people in care (8-18 years) felt involved in decisions about their care, 8% hardly ever felt involved, 40% sometimes felt involved and nearly half (46%) felt involved all or most of the time.



Significantly fewer children and young people living in residential care (78%) felt involved in decisions about their care at least sometimes, compared with all other living arrangements combined (88%)¹².

In their comments, some young people spoke positively about being listened to.

"I have had a brilliant experience. The [LA] council made a decision for me to move to [LOCATION] when I was 14 and that was the best decision they did for me. I met my lovely foster family and had such a lovely time with them. I was always listened to and felt appreciated every time I had my social worker visit."

(Care leaver)

Young people in care who did not feel involved in the decisions that social workers made about their lives or were not given chances to be trusted had more than two times greater odds of low well-being. Similarly, care leavers who felt involved in pathway planning had greater odds of high well-being, whereas not being involved was linked to low well-being.

"I think its important for people to listen to young people - they are the experts of their life. As a young person I don't think the best decisions are always made for me as I am hardly ever asked what I would like."

(11-18 year-old)

Three in five (60%) of care leavers felt involved in their pathway planning all or most of the time.



10% of care leavers either did not have a pathway plan or did not know what one was.

Care experienced consultants stressed that being involved in decisions also meant being informed. They described how in care sometimes decisions were made about their lives that were not explained in a way that they could understand. They felt that there was a lack of transparency and social services could be very secretive around young people. They felt that workers should explain why things can't be done – even if it's an uncomfortable conversation – as then at least you know.

This was also reflected in some of the comments from children and young people in the survey around issues like family time and preparation for leaving care. Some reflected confusion and worries caused by a lack of information.

"I don't know why he (the social worker) sent us to live with Nanny."

(4-7 year-old)

¹² $\chi^2(1, 3,482) = 34.67, p < 0.001$

"Let people know what they are entitled to, their rights AND GRANT THEM IT...I am intelligent enough to always ask questions and do my own research and advocate for myself, I shouldn't have to though, as a young person who has dealt with too much trauma at a young age and removed from home I expect these people to look after me better."

(Care leaver)

Getting opportunities to do things independently, make mistakes and learn from them is an important part of growing up. When we first developed the surveys, young people we worked with stressed the importance of having opportunities to be trusted as well as having trusted people in their lives. Our care experienced consultants described how workers often see children as fragile which impacted how they were treated (e.g. difficult conversations were avoided). They felt workers can infantilise and adultify children in care at the same time. They felt that you need to give young people more control. For example, you shouldn't tell young people what to buy with their leaving care allowance, but should explain what they need and then they can make the decisions. One care leaver surveyed described the impact of taking control had on their well-being.

"I never believed I would score answers so high in such a positive manner. Within the last year I have finally been taking my life into my own hands and making the decisions for myself and no one else has had a say in that other than the support I have received from people during this time. Encourage young people to make their decisions for themselves and trust their gut feeling. It's about them at the end of the day and we are not brainless puppets that you have to make decisions for us, just encouragement and support is what we need to plant the seed of self-worth in this world."

(Care leaver)



1 in 12 young people aged 11-18 said they hardly ever or never got a chance to be trusted.

"If my foster carer could be a little more laid back. If I had more freedom, trust and responsibility I would be a lot happier."

(11-18 year-old)

An important right for children in care is being able to share their wishes and feelings openly with their workers. To make this possible, children need opportunities to speak with their worker in private. This creates a safe space where they can raise concerns without fear of being overheard. A few quotes described how carers treated children differently in front of social workers, suggesting the importance of exploring how they are doing one-to-one.

"In foster care I used to get called names and felt upset and worried all the time. When the social worker came round the carers would be really nice to me."

(8-11 year-old)

Our analysis showed that children in care who were unaware they could speak to their worker alone had 2.5 times higher odds of low well-being. 91% of children in care aged 8-18 years knew that they could speak to their social worker on their own. However, this appeared to be less well understood for younger children – a fifth of 8 year-olds (21%) did not know that they could speak to their social worker on their own compared to only about 1 in 20 (6%) of 12 year-olds.



Opportunities to learn and grow

What opportunities we have impact on our well-being. By providing opportunities to learn and grow children's social care can improve children and young people's quality of life and help them enjoy life. Like with all other drivers, understanding children's wishes and feelings helps ensure they have the right opportunities for them.

"I think they should let me have a say in my education. I like where I am now and have made lots of friends. I don't like my other school because it makes me depressed."

(11-18 year-old)

For most children, school is a space where they spend much of their time. Liking school was important to the well-being for all age groups of children in care and those that were not afraid to go to school because of bullying had better odds of high well-being.



3 in 10 girls were afraid to go to school because of bullying compared with 2 in 10 boys.

"School isn't the best but it can be good sometimes. The good thing about school is my teachers, but the not good things are friends that I can't trust, and I get bullying sometimes."

(11-18 year-old)

For care leavers, engagement in education, training, or employment (ETE) was linked to high well-being. Whereas not being engaged in this increased odds of low well-being. This reflects findings in the general population where adults' well-being is closely tied to their participation in work or learning (Franklin et. al, 2025).



Almost 9 in 10 of young people who remained with their foster carers after 18 were in education, training or employment, compared with just over half in supported accommodation.

"I'm afraid what I'm going to do after leaving care. The future is very uncertain for me and I'm lost. No hope at all. No job and no stability."

(Care leaver)

Young women and young people with disabilities or long-term health conditions had lower levels of engagement in education, training and employment. Many young people mentioned mental health challenges including anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress kept them from working. Some young people mentioned structural or practical barriers to gaining or sustaining work or education including issues with housing, transport, their immigration status, or court/prison. Many were also unable to work due to parenting or caring responsibilities, or pregnancy.

"I suffer with my mental health issues I used to work in hairdressing but had to leave when everything got too much for me to handle on my own."

(Care leaver)

For care leavers, who often have to live independently at a much younger age than their peers, coping financially was closely linked to well-being.



The percentage of care leavers who report they struggle to cope financially has increased significantly from 18% in 2017-20 to 22% in 2021-24¹³.

"The rising cost of living is awful... I rent a house where it's £350 rent and then electric is £150 and gas is £100 plus water, council tax, food has INCREASED horrendously. I'm in my overdraft and I've always been financially thriving and I've never felt so horrible with the increasing cost of living. I can't even enjoy going outside for a coffee I feel guilt. I hate it."

(Care leaver)

Although having opportunities to practice life skills was not significantly associated with low or high well-being, it was a topic that a large number of young people highlighted in their comments. By the time they reach 17 most (98%) do have an opportunity to practice life skills at least sometimes, but comments still suggested that many care leavers felt unprepared for leaving care and living on their own.



Significantly more children and young people in residential care (95%) got to practice life skills than those in foster care (90%)¹⁴ or living with family and friends (91%)¹⁵.

"Enforce life skills training and budgeting training more strictly. A lot of kids in care are expected to grow up quickly because we have had to do everything for ourselves. It would be nice if we were given some training and this was mandatory for foster carers or care leavers workers to carry out. My foster carers didn't want to teach me budgeting and how to use the washing machine so I had to ask other people or learn myself. Care leavers should be entitled to further help to learn these skills for the outside world even if some look like they're doing okay."

(Care leaver)



More young people in care felt they got the chance to practise life skills in 2021-24 (94%) than in 2017-20 (89%)¹⁶.

"Teach care leavers how to manage bills, job application techniques and most of all teach them how to cook a balanced diet on a budget, there's lots of day-to-day stuff like this that really sucks figuring out on your own and the workers provided don't seem to be placed in a capacity to aid in this."

(Care leaver)

Our evidence shows the importance of the practical conditions to thrive – for younger children and young people this includes making sure they enjoy school and that bullying is addressed. As young people grow older, support to develop skills to manage in adulthood and set them on the track to develop future careers become important. For care leavers it is important to well-being to address the barriers to education, training and employment and help to overcome financial challenges.



¹⁴ $\chi^2(1, N = 5,728) = 20.26, p < 0.001$

¹⁵ $\chi^2(1, 1,997) = 11.41, p < 0.001$

¹⁶ $\chi^2(1, 7,332) = 53.66, p < 0.001$

5 Personal characteristics and circumstances

Children in care and care leavers each have unique journeys into, through and out of the care system. Our analysis highlighted important differences between groups of children and young people.



The odds of low well-being increased if you were female and as you got older. The reverse was also true; with high well-being linked to being male and younger. As we saw in Figure 2 there was an especially sharp decline in well-being between 17 and 18, when most young people leave care. Whilst these trends follow those in the general population, they are more stark.

Across all well-being measures girls and young women in and leaving care tended to have lower well-being than boys and young men. This mirrors findings in the general population. Girls in the UK consistently report lower levels of subjective well-being than boys, particularly in relation to appearance, school, and overall life satisfaction (the Children's Society, 2024).

Those that described themselves in another way or preferred not to answer the gender question had even lower well-being in our surveys. Teenagers in the UK who identify as transgender, non-binary, or other genders consistently report significantly lower levels of subjective well-being than their cisgender peers (BeeWell Programme, 2022).

Entering care represents one of the most profound disruptions in a child's life, often involving separation from primary caregivers, the loss or fragmentation of key relationships, and relocation away from familiar communities. For many, entering care entails not only the loss of familial bonds but also disconnection from peers and schools too (Care Inquiry, 2013).

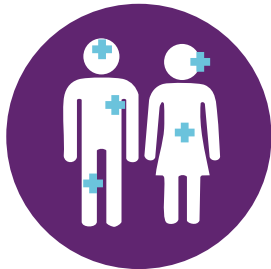


We found that the odds of low well-being were 1.54 times higher for young people (aged 11-18) who had been in care for less than a year.

The odds of low well-being were also greater if you were a care leaver who self-reported a disability or long-term health condition. The latter group were also less likely to feel safe, settled and that where they lived was right for them or to trust their worker or report that they had someone who believed in them.

“At the time of leaving care I was assumed to be on my own, financially, physically and mentally, my foster family was told to cast me out and at the time I was incapable of supporting any aspect of my life, I couldn’t function and this led to a severe mental breakdown, I believed I would be homeless, disabled, depressed and alone. Care services didn’t believe in my disabilities and forced me into situations I couldn’t understand or handle, if it wasn’t for the compassion my foster carers had to let me stay another year and me having to stay in hospital I wouldn’t be here today, I know I would have died in one way or another.”

(Care leaver)



47% of care leavers with a disability or long-term health condition had low well-being, compared with 25% of care leavers who were not disabled.

“My mental health, mainly the medication I’m on makes me very sleepy and disorientated and my disability also stops me from going outside”

(Care leaver)

Happiness with how you look



A third of care leavers are unhappy with how they look compared with 15% of children in care

For many children and young people (especially adolescents), appearance is a major part of identity, self-esteem, and social comparison (Children’s Society: Good Children Report, 2024). For both children in care and care leavers the factor that was most strongly associated with well-being was how happy you felt with the way you look.

The logistic regression showed that how children and young people felt about the way they looked was the factor most strongly associated with both high and low well-being. 11-18 year-olds who were not happy with their appearance had 7.44 times higher odds of low well-being and care leavers had 4.11 greater odds.

The ONS includes happiness with appearance in personal well-being. As it appeared so closely linked to well-being we have therefore not listed it as a driver of well-being, but considered as one of the different aspects of personal well-being. In practice this means that understanding how children and young people feel about their appearance may be an important part of understanding their overall well-being.



6 Conclusion and recommendations

Children in care and care leavers, like all children, have dreams and goals, and they deserve the same opportunities as other children to realise them.



Understanding how children and young people feel about their lives is key to helping them thrive. The Bright Spots programme enables local authorities and policymakers to focus on what truly matters to children in care and care leavers. By showing which factors drive well-being the findings in this report can help shape policy and practice to make life better for our children in care and care leavers.

“[What would make care better?] For there to be a real rainbow when I look out of my bedroom window...for me to be able to jump on clouds.”

(4-7 year-old)

Being taken into care is the biggest change the state can make in a child's life. When local authorities step in, they become responsible for securing a better future for that child. Through listening to what children and young people have told us we know that we can get it right. But we don't yet do that for everyone. We must learn from what children in care and care leavers have told us to make sure we cultivate the right circumstances, with the right opportunities and people around for each child to grow up happy and have a good life. Currently the system leaves too many children and young people in care and care leavers feeling helpless and hopeless. Children in and leaving care deserve a care system that cares, that nurtures them and provides them with the foundations to realise their dreams.

“[LA] has to do better for their young people. They need to be more nurturing towards their young people - they need to be gardeners to the flowers (young people)”.

(Care leaver)

Many of the things that improve well-being for children in care and care leavers do not have to cost lots of money. It can be about making little changes such as carving out time for children and young people and making sure they feel seen and heard. Our findings show lots of different things influence well-being. Pop to the park or go for a walk in the woods with the children and young people. Talk to them about the things that are important to them. Give them a card that says ‘well done on passing your exam’ that shows you believe in them.

Whilst making such things happen relies on the relationship individual workers and carers have with children and young people, it is also important that the system enables and supports us all to focus on well-being. This involves fostering a culture that values what is important to children and young people, making sure that the right people are there for them, and that they can offer consistency and are empowered to support children and young people to thrive. For example, recruiting more foster carers will only be helpful if they are people for who building and maintaining trusting and supportive relationships is central to their ethos.

There have already been many positive developments that help support this change in culture. The Independent Review of Children’s Social Care (MacAlister, 2022) identified the importance of relationships for children in care and care leavers. When CoramBAAF adapted Form F, the form which is used to assess new foster carers, they used Bright Spots findings to inform the section on the Child’s Needs. When Ofsted developed their new inspection criteria of services for care leavers they incorporated many of the things that young people have said is important to their well-being.

We need to continue to build on this good work to make care better for more children and young people, act on what is already known and fill in the gaps in our understanding.

Areas for future research

The richness of the Bright Spots data means that there are many more topics to explore and delve into further. We saw that certain groups have better or worse well-being. This research identified some of these and there are doubtless many more.

We have already produced reports exploring the experiences of children and young people with disabilities and long-term health conditions (Baker & Briheim-Crookall, 2024) and children living with family and friends (Selwyn & Briheim-Crookall, 2023).

Further analysis of the experiences of particular groups would be useful, such as girls and young women or those that identify in another way; children in residential care or supported accommodation; and recent entrants into care.

A project to better understand the experience of being a parent and its interaction with well-being for care leavers would also be particularly interesting, as our findings go against trends seen in the general population.

Given the interaction between age and the accommodation that young people live in, it would be particularly interesting to better understand the experience of older young people in care (16 and 17 year-olds), who may be the group most likely to live in non-family based accommodation (residential or supported accommodation) and to complement the findings from our work on homelessness.

We saw how certain indicators had changed over time and more research is needed to understand this, e.g. what had led to a reduction in the proportion of children and young people who feel safe and settled where they live and the factors that are leading to a decline in care leavers reporting that certain groups of people provide them with emotional support (foster carers and personal advisers).

To further inform practice a deep dive into the ‘bright spots’ described by children and young people in the data would be helpful. What does the qualitative data tell us about the experience and views of children and young people who report very high well-being or feel well supported around specific drivers of well-being (e.g. have trusted supportive relationships with carers or workers)?

Every year that we continue the surveys we add more data to our combined data set. Each line in this data set represents a child who has chosen to share how they feel with us. Bright Spots research amplifies their voice and those of thousands of others to better understand their experiences. We found that the insights from care experienced consultants invaluable, it helped us to better understand the messages from children and young people. Therefore, any future analysis of Bright Spots evidence should be done in partnership with children and young people.

This is the agenda for the Coram Institute for Children and the practice and advocacy work of Coram Voice, as it looks to get young voices heard in the decisions that matter for children and young people. The recommendations of this report are focused on the practical steps that can be taken by every agency, professional, local and national government.

Recommendations to move from surviving to thriving

1. Prioritise what children in care and care leavers say is important to their well-being as outcomes locally and nationally.

Well-being is not a “nice extra”—it directly influences our health, education, and employment outcomes. Listening to, recording and acting on children and young people’s views needs to be more embedded throughout Children’s Social Care. Paying special attention to the seven key drivers of well-being when developing, delivering or evaluating services is the starting point.

Bright Spots surveys are one tool available to local authorities to capture the views and experiences of children in care and care leavers. Through the ‘Ask Me What Matters’ Project Coram Voice’s Bright Spots team has worked with a small number of local authorities and their young people to embed some of the questions and topics we explore in Bright Spots in day to day practice

Key recommendations:

- Well-being should be central to how we understand and measure success in children’s social care. Any solutions should draw on the considerable learning from the last decade of the Bright Spots programme and place children and young people’s views at the centre.
- Future opportunities to embed the drivers will include adapting the Department for Education’s national outcomes measures and the evaluation criteria relating to children in care that Ofsted use as part of ILACS (Inspecting Local Authority Children’s Services), in a similar way to the criteria used for care leavers.

2. Ensure policy and practice is led by the seven drivers of well-being for children in care and care leavers.

Our seven drivers of well-being are all about understanding - from children and young people’s perspective – what they need to have a good life. This is what we want for all of our children and young people.

Key recommendations:

- Decision makers should direct national and local policy developments, resources and interventions to target the seven drivers of well-being for children in care and care leavers.
- Local authorities involved in the Bright Spots programme should further target their work by using their local survey findings to identify specific areas to address locally, reflecting the views of their children and young people. Practice examples collated in the [Bright spots resource bank](#)¹⁷ can help this work.

3. Invest in and support children and young people to develop relationships that last into adulthood.

Trusting and supportive relationships are essential and more must be done to make sure children in care and care leavers are supported to maintain and develop relationships with the people who are important to them. Children living in a family, whether with foster or kinship carers or parents and care leavers in family-based settings had higher well-being. This does not mean that these are the right arrangements for all children and young people, but more could potentially benefit.

Key recommendations:

- Whilst maintaining a range of options to best meet the needs of individual children and young people, the Care system should maximise opportunities for children and young people who feel it is right for them to live in family-based environments.
- When improving practice, allocating resources and planning services professionals and decisions makers should prioritise building and maintaining trusting relationships, including with key adults (family, carers, workers) as well as other children and young people (friends and siblings).
- Carers, social workers and leaving care personal advisers should be given the remit, resources and time to get to know children and young people, listen to them, be there for them and support them to maintain other important relationships.

4. Improve support for care leavers and provide gradual and extended transitions

Too many care leavers are struggling and we need to reverse the decline in well-being they have experienced. It is important to recognise and build on the positive role many leaving care personal advisers already play for the young people they work with.

Key recommendations:

- The Department of Education and leaving care services, together with partner agencies should:
 - Help care leavers avoid the cliff edge of care and build trusting and supportive relationships with people who believe in them, including personal advisers who stay with them and do not change.
 - Make sure services are needs led rather than age led and make sure young people are involved in planning their futures through pathway plans and are kept informed and prepared as they make the move from care.
 - Support care leavers to realise their aspirations and overcome barriers to education, training and employment and make sure they can access mental health and financial support when they need it.
 - Help care leavers find and keep safe and stable accommodation that is right for them.
 - For those that are parents recognise the positive impact being a parent can have and support them in the same way other grandparents do.

5. Embed listening to young people in policy and practice improvement.

It is not enough to simply measure and record what children and young people say—their right to be heard requires meaningful action. The Bright Spots programme partners with local authorities to ensure decision-makers listen and respond to the voices of children and young people. In our work we have found that the most effective interventions use co-production and participation, creating solutions together with them.

To achieve this, robust structures for engagement are essential. These include mechanisms for capturing and collating views—such as surveys, care plans, polls, and engagement sessions—as well as spaces where young people can come together to discuss and influence decisions, like children in care councils, care leaver forums, and national equivalents.

Key recommendations:

- National and local government agencies should ensure structures and mechanisms exist at both local and national levels to involve children and young people in decisions—both about their individual care and at organisational and strategic levels.
- When providing opportunities these agencies should recognise that children and young people have different preferences for engagement and may wish to contribute on different issues. They should provide a diverse menu of participation and co-production options so they can choose how and when to be involved.

6. Acknowledge difference

Well-being is influenced by factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, disability, and care experience—meaning a one-size-fits-all approach will not work. Some children and young people will require specialist interventions to address their needs, including mental health support. Recent work by leading academics set out the steps needed to better meet mental health needs of children in care (Hiller et al, 2025) and our recent report (Baker & Briheim-Crookall, 2024) makes recommendations related to children in care and care leavers with a disability. As noted above, further research can deepen our understanding of well-being among specific groups and how to address them.

Key recommendations:

- Services should recognise and respond to the needs of particular groups, including children and young people with disabilities and long term health conditions and girls/young women, who consistently report lower well-being.
- Central government, health and social care should work together to increase access to evidence-informed mental health service provision for children in care and care leavers in England.¹⁸
- Children's social care staff should be alert to circumstances that are linked to lower well-being such as where children and young people live or when they came into care.



18 See Hiller et al (2025) for specific recommendations drawn from experts in this field.

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