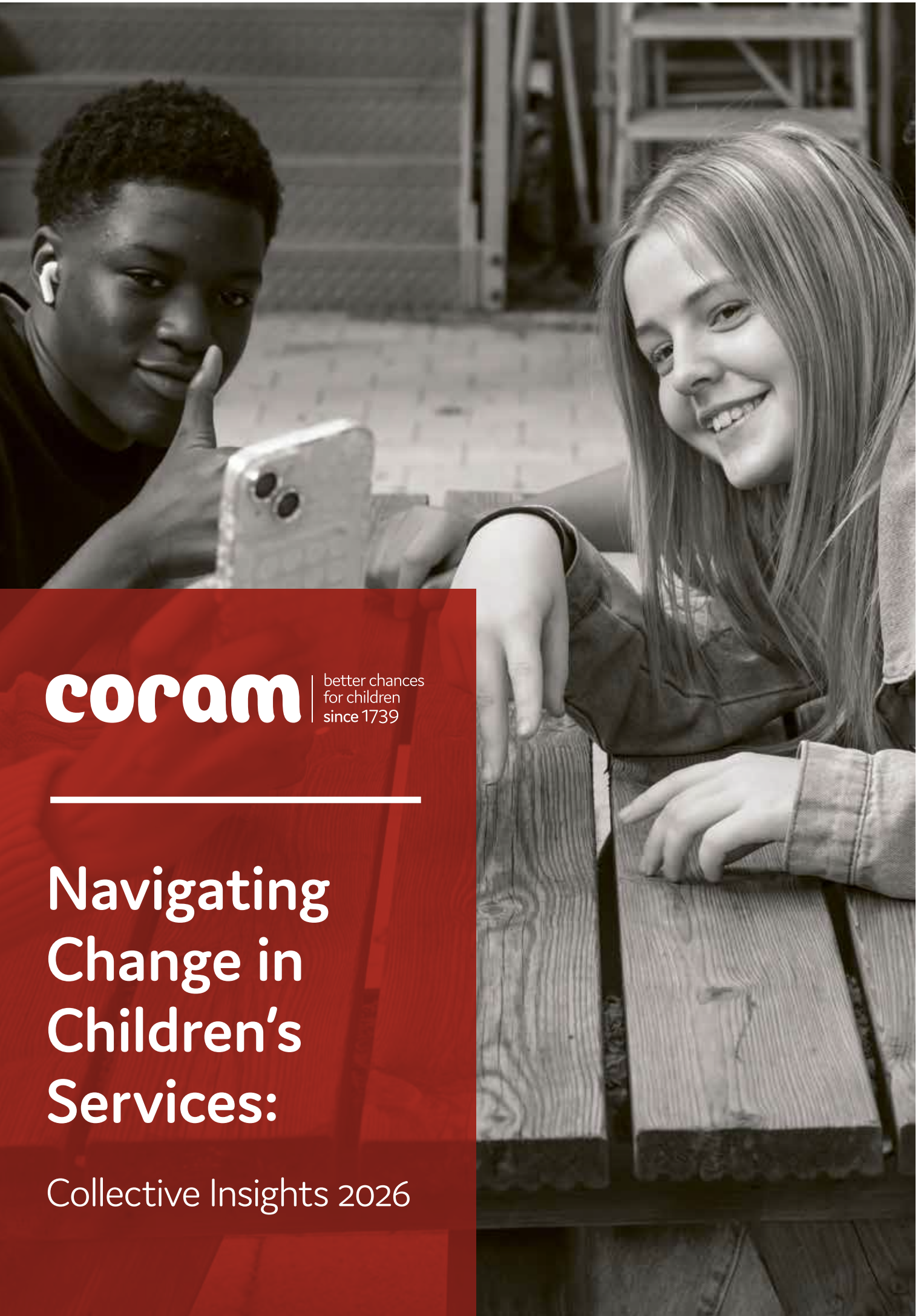

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Navigating Change in Children's Services:

Collective Insights 2026

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Get involved

Sign up to our monthly Digital Practice newsletter
Check out our upcoming events
Get in touch with us at innovation@coram.org.uk

About Coram-i

Coram-i is the innovation and improvement arm of the Coram Institute for Children, translating insight into action. We work directly with local authorities to co-design, test and embed practical solutions to the most pressing challenges in children's services. Our approach draws on evidence, innovation, and a commitment to ethical digital practice – supported by strategic supporters including Microsoft and EY – to strengthen capability and drive positive change across the sector.

Local authorities joining Coram-i become part of an ecosystem that includes:

- Innovation projects that test new models and tools in realworld settings;
- Peer-learning roundtables and thematic working groups;
- Sector-wide Innovation Forums exploring emerging issues like AI ethics and digital practice;
- Publications such as *Collective Insights*, showcasing innovation and learning across the sector;
- Leadership programmes that build capability in innovation, design-thinking and strategic improvement.

Together, these initiatives strengthen sufficiency, equity and capability across children's services through applied research, codesign and system-wide learning.

Coram-i's most recent Innovation Forum explored the role that AI might play in supporting professionals with analysis of the complex, intersecting needs of children, examining practical applications as well as the developmental risks and opportunities with inter-generational commentary.

Future forums will address placement sufficiency and digital practice, whilst innovation projects are tackling children's voice in data systems, social care recruitment challenges and replicating learning in multi-disciplinary approaches to tackling school exclusion.

Current product development is focused on solutions for children and young people in care to access their life stories, data standards for case management systems, data-informed early interventions, practice development in befriending and mentoring, and in tackling school exclusion.

Coram-i is a partner with Social Finance, Local Government Association and Data to Insight in the design of a Centre of Excellence – a support offer for data and digital work in children's social care – and the provider of the data collection in adoption and special guardianship for the Department for Education.

Foreword

By Dame Carol Homden DBE PhD, Coram Group CEO



Across the Coram Group, we see how innovation is shaped not only by technology or policy, but by values, power and practice.

Children's services are navigating a period of profound change. Rising demand, widening inequity, workforce pressure and fiscal constraint are now long-standing features of the landscape. At the same time, children's social care reform is underway, shaped by the Independent Review of Children's Social Care and subsequent policy commitments. These reforms reflect a shared recognition that the current system is under strain and that change is both urgent and necessary.

Yet reform alone will not deliver better outcomes for children and families. Policy direction must be accompanied by careful implementation, organisational learning and attention to how change is experienced in practice. Alongside structural reform, children's services are also grappling with rapid advances in data, digital technology and artificial intelligence – developments that cut across health, education, justice and social care, and which are reshaping expectations of public services more broadly.

Collective Insights 2026 brings together voices from across this complex and evolving system to reflect on what this moment demands of us. Through thought pieces, case studies and shared learning, the publication explores both the opportunities and challenges of integrating data, digital tools and AI into children's social care – always grounded in children's lived experience, and with relational, ethical practice at the core.

Across the Coram Group, we see how innovation is shaped not only by technology or policy, but by values, power and practice. Too often, innovation is framed as something fast, disruptive or technical. In reality, many of the most meaningful changes described in these pages are incremental rather than dramatic. They are relational rather than transactional. They emerge from taking the time to understand the problem fully, listening carefully to children and families, and working collaboratively across professional and organisational boundaries.

The contributions in this edition reflect a system asking more searching questions of itself: who benefits from change, and who might be left behind? How do we judge success when progress is uneven and context-dependent? What does responsible innovation look like when measured at the child's timescale, not the policy cycle or organisational reporting period?

At Coram, our role is to help hold space for these questions – connecting lived experience, practice insight, research and policy, and supporting change that is ethical, intentional and grounded in reality. This responsibility spans the whole Coram Group: our direct work with children and families, our research and policy leadership, and our convening role through Coram-i, working alongside partners across the children's services ecosystem.

If there is a single message that runs through Collective Insights 2026, it is this: reform and innovation are not ends in themselves. They are means to create fairer, more humane systems that listen better, act earlier and respond more effectively to children and families. Achieving that will require courage, collaboration and humility – and a commitment to learn our way forward together.

I am grateful to all those who have contributed their insight, challenge and learning to this publication. I hope it informs, provokes and supports those working across children's services as we collectively shape what comes next.

Carol Homden



Coram-i: insight, innovation and impact

By Tanya Coles, Development Lead at Coram-i

The period from April 2025 to March 2026 marked a year of transition for Coram-i. Rather than driving a large programme of new delivery, this was a year intentionally shaped around listening, convening and sensemaking – creating space to understand how children's services are changing, where risks and opportunities are emerging, and how collective responses might be shaped with care and intent.

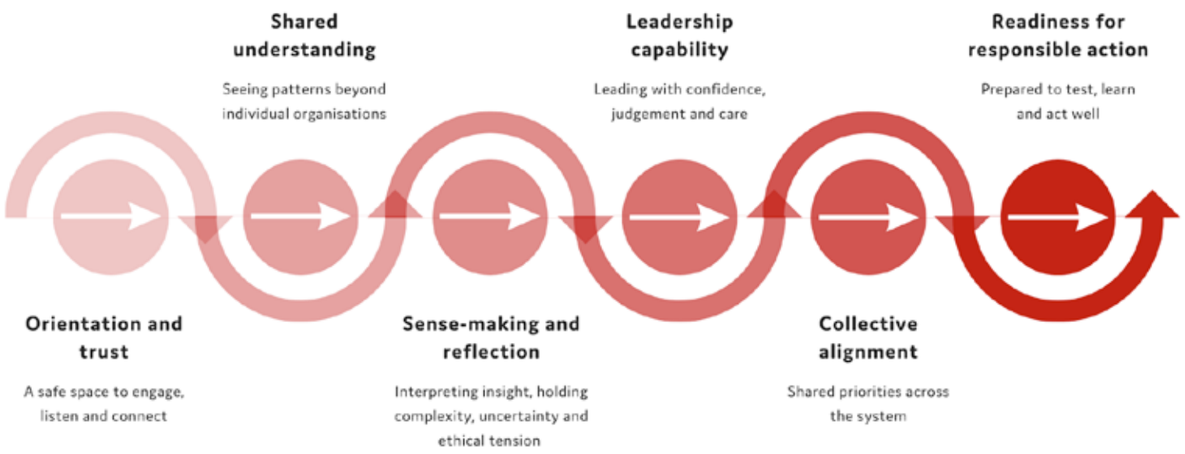
The insights shared throughout this edition of *Collective Insights* reflect that process. They have been surfaced through dialogue across local authorities, charities, academic partners, practitioners, young people and responsible organisations beyond the sector. Together, they offer a picture of a system under pressure, but also one rich in expertise, values and commitment to doing better by children and families.

Coram-i's role in a shifting ecosystem

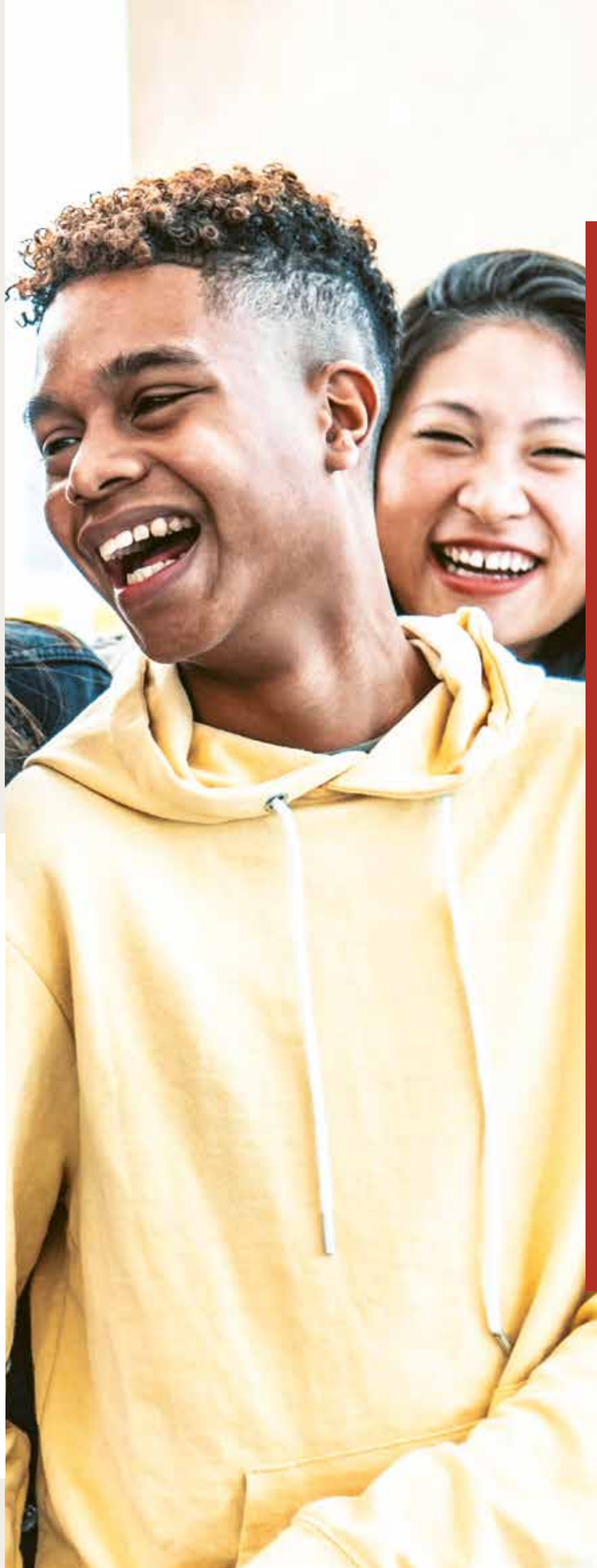
Coram-i sits within the Coram Institute for Children as a bridge between research, lived experience and practice. Our role is not to prescribe solutions, but to **create the conditions for better questions to be asked**, to convene people who do not often share the same space, and to translate insight into forms that can inform action.

During this transitional year, that role became clearer. As children's services confront sustained demand, workforce strain, market instability and fastmoving technological change, there is a growing need for sectorled spaces that are neutral, reflective and grounded in children's lived experience. Coram-i sought to provide those spaces – supporting learning across organisational boundaries and helping to surface patterns that are difficult to see from within any single authority or discipline.

Coram-i Capability Pathway



Coram-i supports leaders to build trust, shared understanding and judgement over time, creating the conditions for responsible, collective action in children's services.



What the year surfaced

Across Coram-i events, roundtables and leadership development activity, several themes consistently came into focus – many of which are explored in depth elsewhere in this publication.

Digital practice and AI emerged as a dominant area of curiosity and concern. Conversations repeatedly highlighted uneven readiness across organisations, gaps in workforce confidence, and the risk of tools entering practice faster than governance, ethics or evaluation frameworks can keep up. At the same time, there was strong interest in approaches that could reduce administrative burden, improve data quality and strengthen children's participation – provided these are used responsibly and transparently.

Placement sufficiency and stability surfaced as a deeply structural challenge. Roundtable discussions reinforced that this is not simply a matter of supply, but of incentives, data, workforce capacity and crossagency accountability. Participants consistently emphasised the need for better collective understanding of need, earlier intervention, and models that reward stability rather than crisis response.

Workforce confidence and capability cut across all discussions. Whether talking about digital change, market pressures or leadership, contributors highlighted the psychological and practical demands placed on practitioners and managers, and the importance of creating environments that support learning, experimentation and professional judgement.

Children's voice in data and systems remained a central thread. Insights from young people, reflected in several case studies in this publication, reinforced the need for systems that support safety without undermining dignity, trust or agency.

Importantly, these themes did not emerge as abstract policy debates. They were grounded in lived experience and operational reality, shaped by those working closest to children and families.

Investing in the conditions for innovation

Alongside convening, Coram-i focused on strengthening the conditions that make responsible innovation possible. The **Innovation Leadership Programme**, delivered in partnership with Magnetic, supported middle and senior leaders to build confidence in leading change amid uncertainty. Rather than focusing on tools or techniques alone, the programme emphasised psychological safety, collaboration and reflective leadership – recognising that innovation in children's services is as much a relational and cultural challenge as a technical one.

The launch of the **Digital Practice** newsletter similarly reflected a commitment to supporting shared learning. Designed as a practicefocused space for insight on data, technology and AI, it aims to inform, question and invite dialogue – rather than promote particular solutions.

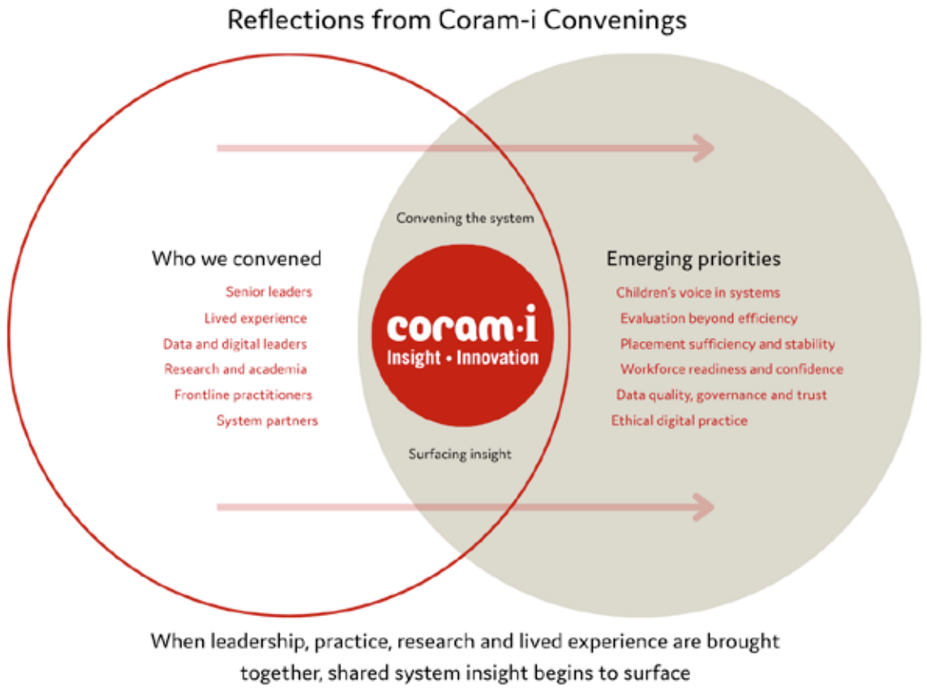
These activities are best understood not as interventions in their own right, but as **infrastructure for learning**: helping the sector build a shared language, surface ethical questions early, and reduce duplication by learning together.

From insight to collective direction

The purpose of convening and reflection is not to stand still. Building on the insights gathered during 2025–26, Coram-i's focus for the year ahead aligns closely with the themes explored throughout *Collective Insights*.

In 2026–27, activity will increasingly centre on two interconnected areas: **digital practice for children's services**, and **placement sufficiency and market innovation**. The intention is to move carefully from exploration toward codesign, testing and shared learning – supporting sectorled approaches that are ethical, evidenceinformed and grounded in real practice.

This next phase will continue to prioritise children's lived experience, workforce readiness and collective responsibility. Not because innovation is an end in itself, but because the challenges facing children's services demand thoughtful collaboration, honesty about risk, and commitment to learning together.





A collective endeavour

The contributions in this publication make clear that meaningful change in children's social care does not come from technology alone, nor from any single organisation. It emerges from sustained dialogue, shared evidence, and the willingness to hold complexity rather than rush to simple answers. Coram-i's role in this work is to support that collective endeavour – helping the sector pause, reflect and move forward with clarity, care and intent.

AI in children's social care: where are we now?

Coram-i

At Coram-i's *AI in Children's Social Care* event, independent consultant Kevin Yong offered a wideranging and grounded assessment of the sector's current position on AI adoption. His keynote painted a picture of a field characterised by increasing interest and momentum, but also uneven readiness and significant gaps in guidance, capability and impact measurement. Drawing heavily on conversations with local authorities as well as the Local Government Association's 2025 *State of the Sector* analysis, Kevin provided a crucial baseline for understanding where the sector stands, and where it may be heading.

A sector that has started the journey – but slowly, and not always safely

Kevin began with an overview of the current intelligence landscape. Despite a flurry of new national resources, such as the **LGA Artificial Intelligence Hub**, the newly established Centre for Social Care and AI Learning (SCALE), and the **AI.gov.uk Knowledge Hub,** he noted that the field still suffers from a shortage of detailed, children's social care specific research and guidance. These initiatives are promising but remain in early stages, meaning local authorities often lack sector tailored evidence and examples to guide their decision making.

More robust insight comes from the **LGA's State of the Sector: AI survey,** which consulted 104 councils, including 65 responsible for children's social care. According to the data Kevin presented, nearly all local authorities report having "started their AI journey," although this spans a wide spectrum, from those merely beginning to think about AI to others already testing or using tools in practice. Notably, the vast majority of adoption has occurred since 2023, coinciding with the arrival of widely accessible tools like ChatGPT which dramatically raised awareness of generative AI.

Yet this growth is not always supported by clear guidance or governance. Kevin highlighted two worrying findings: a small number of councils have banned AI tools altogether on corporate devices, likely leading to staff using them informally on personal devices, and nearly one-fifth have no AI usage policy at all. The absence of basic guardrails is particularly concerning given the data privacy risks of entering sensitive data into public AI tools.

When asked to assess their own readiness, councils expressed confidence in their overall technology infrastructure and organisational culture, but far less certainty around the quality of their data and the capability of their workforce. Kevin argued that training in AI should become mandatory, treated as seriously as safeguarding, GDPR, or health and safety, because the workforce will increasingly need to use AI safely and effectively in their day-to-day roles.

He also noted that the biggest barriers to deploying AI remain the fundamentals: funding, staff capacity, governance clarity, and the ability to evaluate impact. Without investment and structured learning, councils risk using AI without fully understanding its value or consequences.

How AI is being used today

Kevin then turned to a description of how AI is already showing up in children's services. Perhaps unsurprisingly, **Microsoft Copilot** has quickly become one of the most widely used tools, largely because it integrates directly into existing Microsoft 365 environments. This makes it easy for councils to adopt with minimal additional procurement.

Transcription tools represent the other major driver of early AI activity. Applications like **Magic Notes** (Beam) and **Minute** (developed by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology) are being tested across many councils. These tools promise efficiency, but Kevin emphasised the importance of rigorous evaluation by continuing work such as the **Ada Lovelace Institute's report *Scribe and prejudice?* (2026).**

Beyond these high-profile use cases, smaller but significant pockets of innovation are emerging. Predictive analytics and data matching tools, such as Sentinel Partners' platform, are being piloted in cities including **Liverpool**, **Portsmouth** and **Birmingham**. Meanwhile, North Yorkshire has taken a more cautious, low risk approach with its **"Polly" policy assistant**: a tailored AI model trained only on its own policies and designed expressly to only generate content within that scope.

New tools are also being developed to support the drafting of Education, Health and Care Plans. Companies such as **Invision360** and **Agilisys** are exploring ways to use AI to synthesise assessment information, while **Somerset Council** has developed its own opensource solution to improve the quality and consistency of EHCPs.



Where AI could take us next

Looking ahead, Kevin outlined several opportunity areas where AI could meaningfully transform practice. One promising domain is **automated insight extraction** from unstructured records, enabling the creation of relationship maps, chronologies and case summaries. These tools could help practitioners quickly surface key information, especially when working with complex or long running cases.

Councils are also beginning to explore AI's potential in public facing information and guidance, tools that help families identify the right services more easily, or that match them with providers who have availability in real time. AI may additionally play a role in supporting professional development, offering personalised training and coaching tools for social workers, foster carers and adopters.

Kevin also referenced the use of thematic analysis models, like those used in central government consultations, to draw insights from written feedback and engagement responses. And although risk identification remains the most controversial application, he argued that supportive, well-designed tools could one day help practitioners make more informed decisions.

Finally, he noted a longer-term possibility: enabling children and young people themselves to query and understand their social care records in ways that respect their agency and provide clarity about their journey.

Conclusion

Kevin's presentation underscored that AI is no longer theoretical in children's services. It is here, evolving quickly, and already reshaping daily practice in pockets across the country. But the sector remains tentative, with significant disparities in readiness and a pressing need for consistent governance, training and evaluation.

"How do we measure who benefits from AI, and how do we ensure that those benefits accrue to children, families and frontline practitioners, not just organisational processes? These questions must guide the next phase of development."

As the sector continues to explore AI, his message was both pragmatic and hopeful: progress is visible, but meaningful impact will require collective learning, intentional design and a renewed focus on the people at the heart of children's social care.

AI in children's social care: who benefits, and how do we know?

Coram-i

As artificial intelligence accelerates through every part of public service delivery, children's social care faces both immense possibility and profound uncertainty. At Coram-i's November *AI in Children's Social Care* event, Dr Aoife O'Higgins, Director of Evidence at Foundations, the National What Works Centre for Children and Families, closed the day with three provocations. Each was designed to bring the conversation back to what matters most: children's experiences, outcomes, and voices.

Her message was clear: if AI is to have a meaningful, positive impact in children's social care, the sector must be far more intentional about *who* benefits and *how we will know*.

1. Start with the question - who benefits?

Aoife began by noting a striking gap in current discourse: despite rapid experimentation with AI tools, **we do not yet know who is actually benefiting from this technology**.

While enthusiasm for efficiency gains is understandable, especially in a financially pressured sector, she challenged the idea that efficiency is an end in itself. Without a clear, child centred definition of success, AI risks reinforcing existing inequities or creating new unintended harms.

Throughout the event, speakers touched on the fastmoving pace of innovation, yet the conversation often drifted away from children themselves. Aoife urged the sector to "think of the children", not as a slogan, but as a disciplined practice of **centring voice, experience, impact, and outcomes**.

2. Evolve how we learn: research, evidence and real-time insight

Aoife's second provocation focused on **how we learn what AI is doing in children's lives**. Research and evaluation remain fundamental, but the traditional cycle, from bids, to multimonth studies, to lengthy reports, cannot keep pace with AI's development.

Instead, she called for a refreshed approach to evidence:

- Faster, lighter, iterative learning cycles;
- Greater emphasis on capturing real-time practice insight;
- Evaluation methods that reflect the speed of digital change.

Importantly, she highlighted that meaningful learning cannot sit solely with academics or large institutions. Local authorities and practitioners are often best placed to see how AI is shaping children's daily experiences. Their observations, structured and captured well, should form part of the sector's shared evidence base.

3. Bring children and families with us

Aoife's final provocation was perhaps the most challenging: **children and families must be active participants in shaping AI in social care**, not passive recipients.

Engagement is complex, especially when the systems themselves are in flux and the workforce is adapting to new tools. But without intentional strategies for codesign and involvement, the sector risks building solutions that do not work for the very people they are supposed to serve.

She noted in particular:

- Children in care are often over consulted yet underheard;
- AI could deepen mistrust if systems are experienced as opaque or impersonal;
- Trust relies on practitioners who understand AI's capabilities and limits;
- Stable, relational practice remains central, even as digital tools shift around it.



Looking ahead: collective ambition, shared responsibility

Aoife closed by inviting the sector to take on these questions together. Determining who benefits from AI, how we learn, and how we involve children is not the responsibility of any one organisation. It is a shared endeavour.

Her call-to-action mirrors Coram-i's wider ambition: to foster a national conversation that is reflective, evidence informed and deeply grounded in children's lived experience.

About Foundations

Foundations is funded by the Department for Education to produce **actionable evidence** that supports and improves practice and policy for children and families. Their work spans domestic abuse, kinship care, strengthening family networks, and relationships for children in care, alongside accessible practice guides for local authorities.

Evaluating AI in children's social care: beyond the shallows

Coram-i

Artificial intelligence is already reshaping children's social care, but according to Professor Donald Forrester, Deputy Director of The Centre for Social Care and Artificial Intelligence Learning (SCALE), we are "paddling in the shallows," with much more on the horizon: enormous opportunities and equally significant risks. Presenting at Coram-i's November *AI in Children's Social Care* event, Donald offered a thoughtful and often provocative exploration of how the sector can responsibly evaluate AI, even as its development outpaces traditional research cycles.

A field changing faster than the sector can keep up

Donald began by situating AI as a transformative force far beyond children's social care. Citing Sundar Pichai's (CEO of Google) assertion that AI may be "more profound than fire or electricity," he emphasised the scale of global investment, around $1.5 trillion annually, and the inevitability of profound social change. Children's social care will not be exempt.

Yet within the sector, current activity is highly uneven and often bottom up. Local authorities are experimenting in pockets, often influenced by private and voluntary sector partners. Many are adopting tools, but without a shared evidence base or robust understanding of their impact. It is, as Donald put it, "an incredibly exciting time," but one that calls for both optimism and caution.

He spoke from the vantage point of **SCALE**, a first of its kind research centre combining computing, data science, trials research and social care expertise. SCALE's aim is to evaluate how AI is used across children's and adults' services, and to help the sector understand not only *what* tools can do, but *how* they function and *what difference* they make.

What AI actually is and why it matters for evaluation

While Donald was quick to clarify that he is not a technical expert, he offered a clear explanation of the technologies currently bundled under the term AI: machine learning, large language models, expert systems, robotics, and even emerging forms such as genetic AI. These tools mimic or surpass human cognitive processes, processing vast amounts of data in ways that resemble human perception and reasoning.

He illustrated this with a personal example: asking ChatGPT to draft an opening to a sermon, which he and his father-in-law found startlingly strong. For Donald, the point is not novelty: it is evidence of how convincing and wide-ranging these tools already are, and therefore how urgently the sector must understand both their strengths and their limits.

Opportunities: from boring jobs to better decision-making

Donald set out a wide range of potential applications currently being explored or developed through SCALE and other organisations:

- **Administrative support** (e.g., automated summary tools);
- **Interagency data sharing;**
- **Practice improvement** through automated feedback on skills such as motivational interviewing;
- **Supporting research use**, making evidence more accessible to practitioners;
- **AI assisted risk assessment**, shown in early research to outperform human judgement on some tasks;
- **Direct help for families**, such as translation services or interactive "My Social Worker" applications;
- **Advanced organisational analytics**, enabling deeper understanding of need and risk.

"Most of these developments will mature significantly within the next two to four years. The question is not whether they will arrive, but how they should be tested, governed and integrated."

Why obvious benefits still require rigorous evaluation

One of Donald's most striking concerns came from a comment he heard during an attempt to evaluate Magic Notes: *"The benefits are so obvious... Why evaluate?"*

This, he argued, is precisely the mindset that puts children, families and practitioners at risk. Even when AI offers clear value, such as reducing notetaking burden, its side effects can be complex and unintended.

Using Magic Notes as a case study, he posed questions across three domains:

1. The AI system itself

Do we know how accurate it is? Have we tested for hallucinations? Is it truly the best way to achieve the task? Could a publicly funded alternative offer similar benefits without commercial constraints?



2. The human user

Will practitioners still check outputs, or will busy workers gradually outsource more of their thinking? How might reliance on summaries affect their understanding of families?

3. The organisational context

If AI saves time, how will underfunded authorities use that time? To reduce stress? Improve practice? Or reduce staffing?

For Donald, these questions are not arguments against AI. They are arguments for **evaluating AI in its full context**, not only in terms of direct function.

Evaluation must become interdisciplinary and rapid

Donald argued that children's social care already has strong methodologies for evaluating complex interventions, particularly through theory-driven and collaborative approaches like those outlined in Medical Research Council and National Institute of Health and Care guidance. These methods emphasise working with practitioners, children and families to understand how an intervention works, for whom, and under what conditions.

But AI demands something more:

- **Interdisciplinary evaluation**, including deep technical understanding of how models function "under the hood";
- **Attention to interaction effects**: the combined system of human, AI and organisational context;
- **Recognition of significant side effects**, not just headline benefits.

The biggest barrier, however, is **time**. Good research is slow, methodical and collaborative. AI development is fast, commercial and accelerating.

Authorities face real operational pressures and will not wait years for evaluative findings. Implementation is already happening. Donald raised the urgent question: *How can evaluation adapt to keep pace?*

What the sector must prioritise next

Donald concluded that evaluation is only one part of what the sector needs. To make AI work for children and families, we must develop:

- Workforce readiness;
- Organisational readiness;
- Robust governance and trusted guidance;
- Faster, more flexible research funding.

He emphasised the essential role organisations like **SCALE** and Foundations play in combining social care expertise and technological understanding, something the sector urgently needs more of.

Conclusion: a transformative moment, if we choose it

Donald ended with both enthusiasm and realism. AI represents extraordinary potential, from reducing administrative burden to improving decision quality and expanding access to help. But without thoughtful evaluation, rooted in ethics, technical insight and social care values, AI risks amplifying inequity, reducing practitioner autonomy and reshaping the workforce in ways we do not yet understand.

The challenge ahead is to step beyond the shallows, with curiosity and caution, and to build the evidence, governance and readiness needed to ensure AI serves the fundamental purpose of children's social care: improving the lives of children and families.

About SCALE

The Centre for Social Care and Artificial Intelligence Learning (SCALE) will harness the potential of AI for social care, aiming to kickstart activity and build critical mass in a new, exciting, and fast-moving cross-disciplinary research area. SCALE will deliver real-world impact by placing those with direct experience of services at the centre of our work. We will include service users from adult and children's social care, as well as practitioners and policymakers, to build sustainable long-term collaborations and to secure external funding.

From insight to impact: AI, intersectionality and the future of children's social care

Coram-i

Introduction

Insight to Impact: AI, Intersectionality, and the Future of Children's Social Care brought together leaders from across children's social care, data science, policing, academia and policy to explore one of the defining questions facing the sector: **how can artificial intelligence (AI) and data be harnessed to improve outcomes for children and families, without undermining the relational, ethical and human foundations of practice?**

Framed as a space for reflection rather than definitive answers, *Insight to Impact* brought together expertise spanning lived experience, frontline delivery, research and system leadership. Across the afternoon, speakers explored the scale of current challenges, the realities of data and technological maturity, and the choices the sector must now make as AI becomes increasingly embedded in professional and everyday life.

Can data improve children's lives?

Lisa Harker, Director of the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory, opened the keynote sessions with a clear proposition: **data can improve children's lives—but only if it is used critically, contextually and through an intersectional lens**.

She reminded the audience that children's lives are shaped by multiple, overlapping factors – ethnicity, deprivation, age, disability, geography and family context – and that analysing these characteristics in isolation risks obscuring rather than illuminating inequality. Drawing on research from the Family Justice Observatory and wider studies, Harker illustrated how patterns of involvement in children's services and family court outcomes differ significantly when these factors intersect, particularly in relation to ethnicity and deprivation.

She also highlighted major demographic shifts, including growing diversity among children and young people and the rapid expansion of the "mixed ethnicity" category – arguing that broad labels are becoming increasingly blunt tools for understanding lived experience.

Turning to the use of AI in practice, Harker examined the rapid uptake of **AI-enabled transcription and summarisation tools** in children's social care. While these tools offer clear potential benefits – reducing administrative burden and freeing up time for relational work – she warned of risks including hallucination, bias in speech recognition, and the danger of evaluation frameworks that prioritise *time saved* over *children's and families' experiences*.

Her challenge to the sector was clear: **innovation must be judged by whether it helps families feel heard, understood and better supported**.

> **"Children's lives are shaped by multiple, overlapping factors... broad labels are becoming increasingly blunt tools for understanding lived experience."**
>
> Lisa Harker, Director, Nuffield Family Justice Observatory

The challenge

Former National Police Lead for Child Protection **Simon Bailey CBE** grounded the conversation in the realities of harm facing children and young people, particularly in the digital sphere.

Focusing on child sexual abuse and online exploitation, Bailey described a global threat landscape that is growing in scale, speed and severity. He emphasised that online abuse is not a lesser harm: for many victim survivors, the trauma is deeper, more enduring and compounded by the knowledge that images may persist indefinitely.

Bailey outlined how grooming methods have changed, with AI enabling rapid coercion and sextortion, and how peer on peer abuse now accounts for a significant proportion of reported cases. He also raised serious concerns about the misuse of AI, including the generation of synthetic abuse material and the weaponisation of technology against schools and young people.

However, Bailey was equally clear that **AI must be part of the solution**. Drawing on his experience of safeguarding practice reviews, he argued that AI could help transform training, supervision and early warning systems – surfacing patterns and risks that are currently missed due to fragmented data and overwhelmed systems. He challenged longstanding assumptions about datasharing, noting that many of the most serious failures stem not from inappropriate sharing, but from vital information *not* being shared at the right time.

His contribution underscored the stakes of the discussion: **used badly, AI can magnify harm; used well, it can save lives**.

> **"I have read too many cases where serious harm has been sustained because vital information wasn't shared at that time."**
>
> Simon Bailey CBE, Chair, International Policing and Public Protection Research Institute, Anglia Ruskin University



The reality of data and technological maturity in children's social care

This presentation grounded the preceding discussion in the practical realities of implementation.

Matthew Wagner (Chief Analyst, Kent County Council), opened by acknowledging the instinctive fear many leaders feel when imagining AI making decisions about children. The task, he argued, is to move from asking *whether* we are comfortable with AI, to defining *what* we are comfortable with AI doing – and under what conditions.

Andrew Newman (Principal Data Scientist, Open Data Institute), provided a clear framework for understanding AI as a spectrum of capabilities, from narrow, task specific tools to autonomous systems. Crucially, greater capability brings greater risk, and responsible implementation depends on making conscious decisions about where on that spectrum specific uses should sit. All AI, he emphasised, depends on strong, well governed data infrastructure.

Kevin Yong (Consultant, Coram), translated this into practical use cases already within reach: improving data quality, supporting translations and accessibility, summarising records, mapping relationships, assisting supervision and management, analysing feedback at scale, and helping children and young people access their own records in meaningful ways. These applications focus on reducing friction and cognitive load – *not automating professional judgement*.

Returning to responsibility and readiness, Newman highlighted findings from the Local Government Association showing that only a small minority of local authorities feel confident in their workforce or data readiness for AI. The most concerning insight was not experimentation, but **the mismatch between organisational confidence and workforce preparedness**.

The presenters closed by outlining principles for responsible AI in children's social care: augmentation over replacement, human oversight, transparency, ethical clarity, workforce capability, and design that includes children, families and practitioners. Successful adoption, they argued, is ultimately a leadership challenge rather than a technical one.

> **"We need to focus on augmentation, not replacement... the human in the loop is absolutely critical."**
>
> Matthew Wagner, Chief Analyst, Kent County Council

Panel discussion: workforce, ethics and leadership

A wide-ranging Q&A panel brought speakers together with the audience, surfacing some of the most pressing tensions facing the sector.

Participants raised concerns about the **psychological impact of AI on the workforce**, including overreliance and the erosion of professional judgement. Panel responses emphasised the importance of purposeful design: AI should support thinking, not shortcut it. Imperfect drafts that require professional input were seen as preferable to "perfect" outputs that risk deskilling staff.

Questions also focused on **training and responsibility**: with only a minority of staff feeling equipped to understand AI, who owns workforce readiness? Panellists agreed this cannot sit solely with individual local authorities and requires coordinated, system level leadership.

On governance and accountability, contributors warned against fragmented, secretive experimentation. Greater transparency, shared learning, and national coordination were repeatedly highlighted as essential – both to protect children and to use public resources wisely.

Underlying the discussion was a consistent message: **AI intensifies existing leadership challenges rather than replacing them**.

Intergenerational panel: listening across decades and acting at the child's timescale

Chaired by Renuka Jeyarajah-Dent OBE (Consultant, Coram), the intergenerational panel brought together lived experience, youth voice, community leadership and system expertise to ask what responsible AI looks like when judged by the realities of children's and families' lives today.

Learning from history, without repeating it

Opening the discussion, John Caldicott reflected on growing up at the Foundling Hospital – "a very regimented" upbringing that offered order and practical care, but little recognition of children's feelings. He urged today's professionals to ensure children in care "have better chances for their later life," and to "please listen to the children, then think about AI." Dr Aoife O'Higgins (Director of Evidence, Foundations) cautioned that the sector too often assumes progress and neglects lessons from earlier decades; rigorous evaluation – of what works, what doesn't, for whom, and in what contexts – must be embedded rather than retrospective.

Trust, transparency and co-production

From a youth perspective, Olivuh asked how councils can deploy AI ethically when communities may not trust it, pushing for consent, choice and visible safeguards. Jabed Hussain (Associate Director of Business Efficiency & Digital Transformation, Kingston & Richmond Children's Services) argued that transparency starts with basics like a central register of AI use and must extend to co-design with young people and families, moving beyond consultation after products are built. Vendors, he said, should explain how models make decisions and who builds them; otherwise "black-box" systems will erode confidence. Jenny Coles CBE (Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel; ADCS President 2020/21) reinforced that statutory agencies should treat openness as default: local communities should know where AI is used – across councils, police and schools – and be enabled to help shape it.

Bias: revealing it, not reinforcing it

Bias featured prominently. Ade Banjoko (Director, Parents Action and Resource Centre CIC) described how disciplinary policies can disproportionately impact Black pupils – down to subjective rules such as "professional hairstyle" – and called for parents and communities to be involved from the start when policies and tools are designed. Hussain added that historic datasets reflect historic bias; councils should re-read case notes with people with lived experience and test for fairness before models influence decisions.

Language, culture and the limits of the model

On a lighter but telling note, Olivuh asked whether AI keeps up with Gen-Z slang. O'Higgins noted that while models can list terms, language is about culture, context and relationships – reminding the room that AI can support understanding but cannot replace the relational work of building trust across generations.

Ideas the sector can act on now

Panellists converged on several practical proposals:

- **Publish what you use:** councils should make AI use visible (e.g., public registers) and explainable, including procurement questions on training data, decision logic and team diversity;
- **Co-design from day one:** move from post-hoc consultation to co-production with young people, families and communities, especially those most affected;
- **Evaluate impact on children and families:** complement productivity metrics with measures of voice, fairness, comprehension and relational quality;
- **Mind the readiness gap:** excitement is high, but capability is uneven; off-the-shelf tools rarely fit the nuances of children's services without careful problem definition and local adaptation;

Care, connection and appropriate emotional support

Asked whether AI can provide emotional support, O'Higgins said there is emerging promise for low-level psycho-educational help, alongside real risks (e.g., harmful guidance and gaps for certain mental-health conditions). The consensus: AI may signpost and scaffold, but human relationships remain irreplaceable.

One-word takeaways

The panel closed with four anchors for responsible adoption: **Inclusion** (Ade Banjoko), **Transparency** (Jenny Coles CBE), **Evaluation** (Aoife O'Higgins) and **Co-design** (Jabed Hussain) – with John Caldicott's reminder ringing loudest: **listen to the children first.**

Closing reflections

In closing the event, **Dame Carol Homden DBE PhD** (Chief Executive, Coram), drew together the threads of the afternoon, reminding attendees that *adaptation is not optional*. She highlighted the intergenerational challenges facing society, noting that children are now the smallest proportion of the population in history – with profound consequences for voice, trust and resource allocation.

Homden emphasised that AI arrives at a moment of declining trust in institutions and data, and that technological change is as much a behavioural and relational challenge as a technical one. Efficiency alone, she argued, will never meet the scale of need.

Returning repeatedly to children's voices, she invoked a familiar refrain from young people: *"I've been telling you for ages – but you didn't listen, and you didn't act."* Used well, AI offers the possibility of acting at the **child's timescale** – helping services listen once, decide swiftly and respond meaningfully, while remembering that nothing can replace human care, connection and compassion.

She closed by inviting participants to stay engaged with Coram's ongoing work on digital futures and youth-led insight, reinforcing that the future may be digital – but it must also remain deeply human.

"We need to think beyond the SROI equation. Because if we change our resourcing based upon an efficiency model, then we are never going to respond to the scale of the challenge."

Dame Carol Homden DBE PhD, Chief Executive, Coram

Conclusion

Insight to Impact: Intersectionality, AI and the Future of Children's Social Care closed on a shared recognition that technological change is already reshaping the landscape in which children, families and practitioners live and work. Across the day, speakers and panellists emphasised that AI is neither a silver bullet nor an existential threat – it is a powerful set of tools whose value will depend on how intentionally, collaboratively and ethically they are developed and deployed.

What emerged was a striking alignment across generations, disciplines and roles. Leaders in data and technology stressed the importance of infrastructure, readiness and robust evaluation; practitioners highlighted the need for transparency, fairness and safeguards; young people and community advocates reminded the room that trust must be earned, not assumed; and those with lived experience of earlier eras of care urged today's system to hold history close, learning from what it got right and what it did not.

Throughout the event, one message resurfaced repeatedly: **relationships remain at the heart of children's social care.** AI may ease administrative burdens, reveal patterns, support decisions and even offer low-level emotional scaffolding – but it cannot replace the sense of safety, connection and dignity that only humans can provide. If used well, AI could create more space for the work that matters most: listening, understanding and responding on the child's timescale.

The call to action is therefore a collective one. Build **inclusion** into every stage. Make **transparency** a norm rather than an afterthought. Invest in **evaluation** and evidence. Codesign with **children, families and communities**, not around them. Above all, approach innovation with the humility and courage to recognise that the future of children's social care will be shaped not only by what is technologically possible, but by what is morally and relationally essential.

As the panel's closing words reminded us...

"Listen to the children, and then think about AI"

John Caldicott, former pupil of the Foundling Hospital

AI and the future of children's social care: why waiting is not an option



By Professor Sir Anthony Finkelstein CBE FREng, President of City St George's, University of London

A personal perspective

I recognise that you will think at the conclusion of this that I am an overenthusiastic tech evangelist, but I'm not. I'm an engineer with, in general, a rather cautious view of the benefits of the adoption of new technologies. I've been through the cycle enough times to have reached that point.

I believe that enthusiasm for new tools must be tempered with caution about their consequences. I understand that the adoption of technology is socially mediated and that organisational institutional structures are complex and resistant to change. Equally, however, as an engineer, I'm unafraid to acknowledge the possibilities of technical, technologically induced disruption and large shifts in the way things are done and the way society is organised.

The evidence for this is clear. I first encountered artificial intelligence in the late 1970s to early 1980s, at the very end of what was called the AI Winter, signalled in the UK by a report by James Lighthill in 1973. At my first sight, I was interested, but not more than that. I could see the relevance of what were then called knowledge-based approaches and so-called expert systems, and these gave rise, in my case, to a long-standing concern with the use of logic and symbolic reasoning that actually has shaped a good part of my later work.

The history of AI

Machine learning, specifically neural nets, were familiar to me. They reflected the so-called biologically inspired strand of AI. Interesting conceptually and important in applications such as vision and pattern recognition. But otherwise, I thought, a side-line. Besides, they appear to have substantial practical limitations that I assumed would constrain their further development.

Roll forward. Computer speeds increase, growing exponentially, as data volumes and accessibility algorithms are refined leveraging these capabilities. And it seemed reasonable to assume in light of this that machine learning would benefit. I anticipated, correctly, that some of the familiar applications would take advantage of this better image processing or perhaps better speech recognition. I was aware that people were building ever larger language models, and I expected that maybe natural language and machine translation would benefit from these.

I think the overwhelming majority of computer scientists anticipated what would happen with large language models. I recall my first use of ChatGPT, and remember I was aware of what was going on, but I was profoundly shocked at the behaviour of the system, at what it could do. Indeed, despite the fact that I knew how it worked, actually in some reasonable technical detail, I could not comprehend it. I simply didn't understand what massive scale amplified, admittedly, by some neat engineering would yield.

I had to repeat to myself that I was not seeing search, but rather the results of a statistical process giving rise to predictions at the level of words, tokens and text fragments. To this day, whenever I use these tools, I still struggle to really intuit what those models are doing, and it's really important we hold on to the shock, because we've crossed a frontier.

The implications, the impact of technology and the ways in which innovations are applied have been much studied. For advanced technologies, the translation from lab to broader uptake generally takes an extended period. There's a gap between big gaps, in fact, between early adopters, early majority, late majority and laggards.

The current state of AI

But this is not what's happening with AI: take-up is progressing extraordinarily rapidly. Productivity opportunities and applications are proliferating. The leverage that can be secured from integration with existing platforms and data resources are evidently very large and are emerging on an almost daily basis. This is so much the case that in business, impatient with even the accelerating pace of deployment, individual use for routine tasks has become commonplace. It is impossible to say with any precision where this might lead, not least in the context where the models themselves continue to develop at extraordinary speed.

Whilst AI has limitations, some of which I will discuss, many of these are intrinsic to its nature. Part of what makes it both powerful and fascinating. With reference to hallucinations, where the tendencies towards approximation, creativity and reinterpretation, these are not flaws. They're features that open up new ways of thinking and working. Understanding these tendencies is crucial to harnessing AI effectively, rather than risking dismissing it prematurely.

"To dismiss AI for its imperfections is to overlook the very essence of what makes it valuable: generative, associative, adaptive intelligence that complements rather than replaces human insight."

It's a system that generates, suggests, and adapts, with all that implies for its use. It is, in my view, a strange behaviour



to ask an AI tool to do things it's not designed to do and then present the inevitable shortcomings as evidence of its failure. It's very strange behaviour to apply AI, where its known limitations might yield adverse effects without applying obvious and readily available mitigations.
And it is, in my judgement, the strangest behaviour to see an amazingly powerful technology and focus on its envisaged failings and not its immediate potential. **Scepticism is valuable. Dismissiveness is counterproductive.**

We should also keep in mind that **the advent of AI does not make all of the rest of computing suddenly go away.** We still have search. We still have information retrieval. We still have computational models and so on. **AI is an addition to the digital ecosystem, not a replacement for everything that came before.** Indeed, perhaps one of the most important digital developments is the convergence of AI with a range of other technologies. For example, virtual and augmented reality, amongst others. These convergences will multiply AI's impact, requiring us to think holistically about technological transformation.

An imaginary scenario

So, what does AI mean for children's social care? Now, I want you to recognise that I am an occasional tourist in your professional domain and not an expert. But let me set out an imaginary scenario and you can ignore the details or adapt accordingly.

So, a child is recounting their family and the relationships in the households with which they interact. This is as described, transcribed in real time. The voice, key relationships and names are extracted and correlated with other records, and inconsistencies are fed back in real time as prompts for the social worker. Queries are composed and can be sent to other external data sources: health, education, policing, justice. They can be made and catalogued. They can be reconstructed in privacy preserving ways. The responses can be risk assessed with the social worker reviewing those assessments.

A simple exchange format can be provided, augmented with information from the social work record that can be used in an automatically constructed workflow to construct a genogram, a standard pictorial representation for these relationships, and you can go on. A short video can be synthesised with an avatar of the social worker explaining the genus gram in terms the child themselves have used perhaps using any one of the languages that family might be using, perhaps supported by chat interaction, and a redacted and or synonymised version can be produced that can be shared with other experts.

Now, that's just one extended use case, but it's not a fantasy. It actually relies on technologies that are readily available now achievable using existing apps and services. And this scenario excludes all the obvious routine tasks: compiling reports, sending requests to other organisations, filling in forms, maintaining key information items in the record, scheduling, collating, searching and summarising. It excludes too training and testing.

What does AI really mean for children's social care?

AI offers the potential for highly personalised and interactive support, adaptive in real time, generating new pathways and processes, evaluating progress dynamically and adjusting to different styles. **But let's be clear: AI in children's social care is not about replacing human interaction.** Face to face engagement is not going away. On the contrary, **AI has the potential to supplement personal engagement, making it deeper, more meaningful by automating routine tasks and freeing up social workers for what matters most**: listening, co-creating solutions and enabling access to critical resources. The role of the social worker will evolve, but it will remain indispensable.

Beyond children's social care, the welfare, care, health, education and justice system are equally subject to change. **AI will not just reshape how we deliver social care; it will transform everything around it.** It will reconfigure the infrastructure. It will influence the policies, the funding priorities and the strategies. And this is not some distant pipe dream. The consequences are unfolding now and we will need to evolve structurally and technologically.

The pace of change is accelerating, though I recognise that there may be technological discontinuities that are difficult to assess at this moment. But adaptation is not optional. It is imperative. Ultimately, we will see children and adults who are different because of these changes. **AI will not just change the ways in which we provide care, it will change the service users themselves, their expectations, their cognitive processes, and the ways in which they engage. It's going to change society. So, the real question is, of course, what can and should we be doing right now?** We must lean into change. We must start the dialogue. AI is here. We must engage with it rather than resisting. Waiting is not a strategy; active participation is. We must listen to both social workers and children and families.

They're already using AI in ways that we may not anticipate. Ignoring this reality would mean failing to understand the people we need to support. I think there's a question about who we're watching and who we're learning from. I wonder whether this may be a broader point about public service, about looking at others in public service any longer forms the right benchmarks for what we need to be doing about technology. So, are we benchmarking against organisations that also adapting or against outdated models of delivery?

Recommendations for change

- We must build the right foundations
- We must invest in core infrastructure and platforms. Without the right infrastructure, even the best AI strategies will fail.
- We must treat data as an asset because ultimately, our opportunity to make the most of AI will depend on our unique access to data. High quality data sets will define success. If our data is flawed or inadequate, so too will be our AI driven insights.
- We must experiment, iterate, and refine. Waiting for perfection is not an option. **Failure to experiment is a greater risk than experimenting and failing.**

A strong skill base will be a prerequisite. Some of this, but I suspect not all, can be achieved through training and development from within the existing workforce, but new expertise will be needed, requiring fresh approaches to recruitment and professional development. There is a need for the right partnerships, the existing partnerships networks. Dare I say, suppliers may not be positioned to deliver what we need. New collaborations will be essential and there will be a need to develop the capacity to invest in a plan. Organisations often fail to make it through technology transformations because at the point when changes required, they do not have the ability to make it happen because all their resources are locked into their existing capabilities.

Strategic foresight is critical and conscious of the time. So, we must address the critical risk issues head on. AI brings enormous opportunities, but real risks. Ignoring them does not mean make them go away; addressing them head on is the path to responsible innovation.

So, I think we need to evaluate what's *not* done as well as what *is* done. Decisions by AI must be clearly understandable and accountable, with designated responsibilities for oversight and compliance. Critical decision making must follow a human in the loop approach, ensuring AI generated recommendations are reviewed by suitably qualified individuals.



Systems with high stakes applications cannot be fully autonomous, and final decisions must always be made by humans who bear accountability for these decisions. Ethical governance cannot be an afterthought. It's a necessity. AI systems can reinforce existing inequalities. Bias in AI must be identified and minimised, particularly in training data and algorithmic design. Bias audits and fairness testing are required to identify and mitigate discriminatory impacts before deployment without intervention. AI can amplify systemic biases rather than alleviate them.

Machine learning requires large scale compute with associated demands for energy, and thus consequences for sustainability that must be assessed and mitigated. AI's environmental impact must not be overlooked in the rush towards adoption. No technology is neutral. AI can be used to empower or to exploit, to mislead as well as to inform. This is a broader societal challenge. A powerful technology in the hands of an unethical organisation or individual poses a risk. Ethical AI is not an abstract discussion. It's a responsibility.

"Ultimately, AI in social care is not just about efficiency. It's about possibility. But to realise that potential, it is necessary for professionals to be proactive, intentional and bold. Passivity will mean missing the moment. Collectively, we can't wait for change to happen. We need to lead it. If we don't, we'll leave it to Silicon Valley to define our future for us."

Six months with the Storyteller app

After Cloud, Coram-i and Telford and Wrekin Council

Developed in partnership with Coram-i and After Cloud, Storyteller is a place where digital content can be collected, collated, curated for, with, and by children in care.

Storyteller empowers trusted adults around the child to easily capture meaningful day-to-day moments. Storyteller gives children a genuine voice in their care. Through photos, videos, voice notes and personal reflections, children become active co-authors of their story, with their views meaningfully heard and reflected in care planning. It's already making a significant impact, and we want you to see how.

The app benefits children in care by:

- supporting therapeutic life story work
- capturing moments from their life for their care record
- helping the child or young person to convey their wishes and feelings
- preparing them during transitions, such as moving to a new home
- helping them, and the adult they become, to claim their own story and narrative.

Hear from Telford and Wrekin, who have recently completed a six-month pilot of Storyteller, on their experience with onboarding, uptake and feedback from users below.

Courtney Horne, Project Officer at Telford and Wrekin Council

"To be honest, initial take up in the local authority was quite slow. When you go to social workers with a new technology, sometimes there is a little bit of reluctance in using that. I think a lot of our social workers were overwhelmed by the idea of uploading past life story work and past memories and experiences. So, we reframed it as: this is something that you start from now, and you move forwards, capturing day-to-day memories and moments from now. And since then, we've had really great uptake. We've presented at staff briefings, foster carer forums, and we've had lots of foster carers coming forwards and saying that this is really great and they'd like to use it with their child. And from there, we've got lots of social workers involved.

Currently, we have almost 30 stories for our young children and our young people and we're using them in lots of different ways. We're using Storyteller with almost 30 children now and slowly picking up momentum. We are still in the pilot phase and we are hoping that moving forwards, we're able to implement and embed it permanently and that this will become a tool that most, if not all social workers are going to use to give every child the opportunity to have an account on Storyteller, and that really is our vision.

Nowadays, not every single child wants to sit down and do that kind of practical hands-on life story work where they collage and create and scrapbook. This app can be more appealing to a lot of children and engage them in ways that we might struggle to engage them currently.

We're holding practice working groups to see how we can embed Storyteller as part of life story practice at Telford and Wrekin Council. We are quite an innovative, forward-thinking council, so we're always looking for ideas and new things to try and keep children's stories safe, so they don't get lost or put at the back of a cupboard and they don't get water damaged, stuff like that. So far, we're having really great feedback on it.

Our Principal Social Worker believes that every child should have Storyteller in Telford and Wrekin. Since we've been using the app, we've had a few reports from Coram and After Cloud about the usage, and we can already see that some of our young people are engaging really well with the platform. We've got a young person that has their own account and she is the number one creator on Storyteller for our local authority. It's plain to see that she enjoys going on there and uploading her content, which is great to see.

Moving forwards, it's about progressing that and embedding Storyteller as standard practice. We're asking: How can we be using storyteller every day? How can we implement that into the council in a way that means practitioners are putting this forward as an option to every single child?"

Current use cases in Telford and Wrekin Council

- One social worker uses it for their child who has been supported into special guardianship order. They sat together with the parent to collate lots of memories, pictures and audio, so that when the child reaches an appropriate age, the carer can share that with them.
- One social worker works with a family where the father and the mother can't have contact any more. And so, for the child, they are able to maintain contact with their father via Storyteller and keep each other updated on their lives. So that's really great for them, not just for the father to remain in contact with the child, but so the child also has an understanding of who their father is, with oversight from the social worker.
- Storyteller is being used with four unaccompanied asylum-seeking children to help them understand their journey to the UK and what their experience has been in the UK since coming here. This helps to build the relationship with their social worker and allows for that social worker to input into their story.



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Feedback from practitioners includes:

- "It creates and strengthens positive links with people that are special to the young person."
- "A more familiar medium for children and young people to access their own experiences. "
- "It takes the pressure off children and young people to talk about their journey, which they can find very hard."

Liam Bradley, Lived Experience Apprentice at Telford and Wrekin Council

Liam is one of Telford and Wrekin's lived-experience apprentices. He's had the Storyteller app downloaded to his phone for his own work and personal use. Below, he shares some insights into his use and views on Storyteller since the council began their pilot in October 2025.

"I'm going to bring my lived experience into why I wanted Storyteller. Back when I was 15, I actually went through therapeutic life story work. I did it for two years and we did it on this massive roll of paper and we did it like a time mat. I've lost that now. You know, being 16, moving houses; it's going to get lost. And the worst part is my actual life story worker has now retired. I have no way of getting that work that I did with her back. I think Storyteller is one of these apps where it's just permanent. It is a permanent placement and it's always going to be there for you, which is what I would have wanted back when I was that young, instead of sitting face to face, talking about what was going on. I'd much rather have a visual representation and a memory bank. So that's my whole lived experience of life stories.

The way I've been using it recently has kind of been pretty cool in my way. I kind of separated it in my work life and my home life. Everything that I get up to at work, I will put into here just as a little memory bank for myself to say, well done, you've done this. And then I put on my home life for, you know, people to see, people to add on for me as well. You know, because I will be honest, my memory is not the best. It is kind of good for people like me to put stuff on there and have that self-achievement, to look back on what I've accomplished and what I've done and feel that sense of pride for myself."

Learn more about Storyteller here.

Children at the heart of data: insights from young people on the Data Standards project

Coram, Open Data Institute and Social Finance

Social Finance, the Open Data Institute and Coram are working in partnership to develop data and interoperability standards for social care.

This work is jointly funded by the Department for Education (DfE) and the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) seeking to benefit children, young people and adults supported by social care. The programme is under the direction of a steering board which brings together a range of stakeholders from across the sector.

This programme aims to tackle one of the most persistent challenges across children's services: how to share the right information, with the right people, at the right time. Fragmented systems, inconsistent data, and siloed working mean that crucial details about a child's life often sit in separate databases that don't speak to one another. As Coram and Social Finance emphasised at the workshop, the vision is clear: better technology and shared data standards should support better decisions, safer practice, and more meaningful participation for children and young people.

But transforming how personal information is recorded and shared cannot happen without the insight of those whose lives are most affected. That is why young people with lived experience of care were central to a workshop held in November 2025, and why their voices will continue to shape this national programme.

Why young people's voices matter

A recurring theme from the discussion was agency. Young people described the frustration of having little involvement in what is written about them, how it is shared, or how it shapes their care journey. Many highlighted the emotional burden of repeatedly retelling traumatic histories to new professionals, especially during placement moves or when accessing support. They stressed that good informationsharing can prevent re-traumatisation and help professionals understand their needs more quickly and sensitively.

At the same time, young people were clear about their expectations for privacy, autonomy, and control. They raised thoughtful questions: Who *really* needs access to my information? What counts as "too much"? How do we stop sensitive details being shared unnecessarily, or used in ways that limit my opportunities?

Their insights highlight a vital balancing act: safeguarding and support must improve, but not at the expense of dignity, trust, and the right to keep aspects of their lives private.

What young people told us

1. Safety and safeguarding come first.

Participants strongly supported sharing information that protects them from harm – such as risks relating to going missing, exploitation, or mental health crises – provided this information is accurate, uptodate, and clearly contextualised. They also emphasised the importance of correcting or removing outdated labels that can negatively shape professional attitudes.

2. Mental health and additional needs should be visible, when helpful.

Several young people wanted key diagnoses included, particularly when they affect how they communicate or respond to stress. This could prevent constant selfexplanation and help staff prepare appropriately. But they were equally clear that not every professional should access this level of detail.

3. Not everyone should have access.

Young people supported access for social workers, key workers, personal advisors, and mental health or education professionals. They were firm that some groups, such as GPs, housing officers, or parents where restricted by court order, should *not* have access.

4. Records must reflect progress and lived experience.

Young people want systems that recognise growth, show updated risk levels, and allow them to challenge inaccuracies. Several described gaps or redactions in their own records that left them without a coherent understanding of their early life.

5. A system that supports better placements.

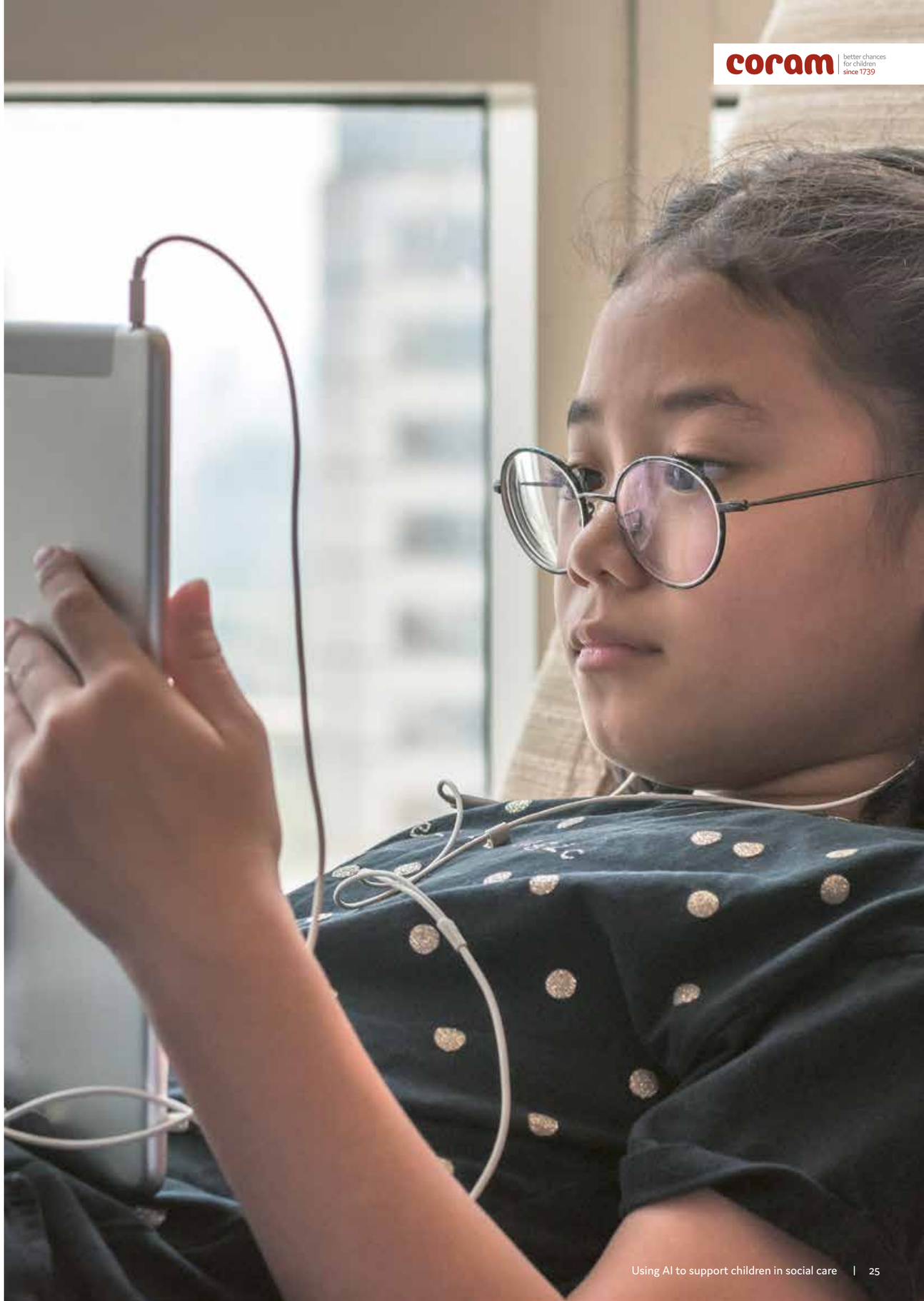
Feedback extended beyond information sharing into placement standards. Young people advocated for transparent Ofsted ratings, data on intrusive measures in residential homes, clearer terminology across regions, and recognition of the value of standalone placements for some.

A future built *with* young people, not just *for* them

Perhaps the strongest message was that involvement must be ongoing. Young people said they prefer regular, focused conversations rather than oneoff engagement sessions. They want to see their input shaping the programme in real time, not disappearing into a black box.

Their insights reinforce a simple but powerful truth: data systems in social care will only succeed when they reflect the lived realities, aspirations, and rights of the young people they exist to serve.

Learn more about the project here.



Ask Me What Matters: listening and responding at scale to care-experienced young people

Coram Voice

For more than a decade, the Bright Spots Programme has shown the power of asking children in care and care leavers directly about their daytoday lives – not just their satisfaction with services. Over 30,000 careexperienced children and young people have shared how they feel, helping us understand the key drivers of wellbeing (see image).

But because Bright Spots data is collected anonymously and at population level, it cannot support real time responses to individual children. This creates a gap: children's voices are heard through surveys, yet not always embedded systematically in their everyday care.

Over the past two years, Coram Voice has been working with four local authorities to close that gap by integrating childled wellbeing questions into routine practice. Each area began by working with care experienced children and young people to identify what matters most to them, and to agree when, how, and with whom these conversations should take place – whether during care planning, pathway planning, or regular checkins with trusted adults.

Each local authority is at a different stage of co-design and development. In some areas, the agreed questions are already embedded into recording systems, and practitioners are using these to guide everyday interactions and curious conversations. Other LAs are refining their processes, working with young people to shape guidance, tools, and agree the right moments for these conversations. LAs are making sure they get feedback on how the changes feel to both children and staff.

Young people have been central throughout. In St Helens, for example, children have recorded messages to their corporate parents explaining why they want the adults that work with them to use the *Ask Me What Matters* questions – and how acting on these conversations can make their care more responsive and meaningful (NB permission required to name the LA and include the film and use screenshot(s) from film and or visual of tool they created).

Across the four sites, this work is helping to build a culture where wellbeing is explored routinely rather than occasionally, and where young people's perspectives actively shape the support they receive. As the learning partner, Coram Voice is capturing what is working well, the challenges encountered, and the insights emerging from implementation.

To follow the learning journey, sign up to Coram Voice's newsletter.



The Coram Institute for Children

Launched in 2025, the Institute is the UK's very first 'think and do' centre solely dedicated to advancing the life chances of children and young people, both at home and internationally, and committed to turning insight into impact in both policy and practice.

It incorporates Coram's existing portfolio of research activity and has at its heart the views and experiences gained from delivering to hundreds of thousands of children and young people, informed by our experience as the country's first and longest continuing children's charity since being established as the Foundling Hospital in 1739.

Young people's voice in research

At the heart of the Institute's research strategy is participatory research with children using a variety of methods to ensure the inclusion of the child's voice. They develop opportunities for youth peer researchers and early career researchers to develop skills and conduct relevant, impactful research. One example of this commitment is in the involvement of peer researchers in a large-scale efficacy trial.

Since April 2024, the Coram Institute team has run a large-scale randomised controlled trial (RCT) for the Youth Endowment Fund of a 12-month restorative mentoring programme for young people aged 11 to 17 at risk of offending and involvement in youth violence.

Central to the trial is a participatory approach to ground the research in lived experience of the youth justice system. Their approach places young people, who have faced similar challenges to those faced by participants, at the heart of an efficacy trial through use of an embedded peer researcher programme. Their team of six paid peer researchers, aged 18 to 25, is the first point of contact for participants referred to the trial. Peer researchers receive a comprehensive training programme and ongoing supervision from the Coram Institute for Children.

Each peer researcher plays a pivotal role by explaining the RCT, gathering informed consent and supporting the young person to complete a set of measures about sensitive topics. We believe including peer researchers is a unique and innovative way to run a RCT in social research settings, enabling meaningful participation and producing credible findings. As one young person told them:

"I answered all the questions honestly, like when they said 'have you carried a knife in the past 6 months?', like, I would either say 'I have' or I would say 'yeah' ... it's easy to admit to things to them [peer researchers]."

Children and Young People with Experience of Care Fellowships

In partnership with the Churchill Fellowship **and the Hadley Trust**

The Churchill Fellowship is a national network of 4,000 dynamic individuals who are inspiring change in every area of UK life. They come from all parts of society and are united by a common mission: to develop new solutions for today's key challenges, based on learning from the world.

Each year, over 100 Churchill Fellows are funded to discover new ideas and best practice overseas in any practical issue they care passionately about, anywhere in the world. They meet leading practitioners, engage with cutting-edge projects and create a report on their findings.

In 2022, the Churchill Fellowship launched a three-year programme of Fellowships focused on Children and Young People with Experience of Care. This Fellowship theme is focused on improving the lives and outcomes of children and young people with experience of care.

This programme offers individuals the opportunity to discover new ideas and best practice from around the world and will support them to apply that learning and inspire change in children's social care in the UK. Coram is acting as a knowledge partner, supporting the Fellows' research and its dissemination, and the programme is co-funded by the Hadley Trust.

The 2025 cohort includes:

Anita Chiverton: Anita's fellowship will explore the impact of the built environment on the mental health of care-experienced children and young people. Anita will travel to the USA and several countries in Europe to learn more about how environmental factors can help healing from trauma.

Caragh Arthur: Caragh's fellowship aims to build a nationally-recognised framework in the UK to rebuild trust between services and women care-leavers who are at high risk of incarceration, domestic violence, and addiction. She will travel to Germany and Switzerland

Clare Holdsworth: Clare's fellowship – based on travel to Australia, New Zealand and Canada – aims to create a best practice model to create paid employment for young people with care experience to do impactful voice, influence and change work.



Eona Craig: Eona's fellowship aims to improve how and where the arts and culture sit in the portfolio of services offered to care experienced young people in Scotland. Based on research in New Zealand and Australia, Eona will examine arts-based approaches that tackle exclusion, stigma, discrimination and poverty, while also nurturing the amazing potential of children and their families to self-start, self-direct and self-actualise.

Grant Trainer: Grant's fellowship aims to explore how policing and public services in Scotland can better respect the rights, voices and lived experiences of people with experience of care. It will explore practical, trauma-informed approaches in the USA and New Zealand that will enhance responsiveness, empathy and effectiveness in Scotland.

Kielly Arbuthnot: Kielly's fellowship focuses on improving approaches to life story work for care-experienced children and young people. Inspired by best practice in Australia and the USA, Kielly aims to create a programme for use by local authorities which mobilises the network around a child to deliver appropriate life story work as well as to record and celebrate the child's life during their time in care.

Laura Lacey: Laura's fellowship, based on travel to Canada and Finland, aims to break the cycle for children who go missing from care, with a plan to devise a blueprint for services to work more effectively with these children and young people in the future.

Rachel Cole: Rachel's work will look at how to improve outcomes for Black children in care through culturally-responsive mentorship models to develop a mentorship initiative as part of a new framework for Black and minority children in foster care, where mentors provide long-term, culturally sensitive support.

Scott Darraugh: Scott's fellowship will explore how community-led models of foster care - like Together California's 'Our Village' in the USA - can create stronger, more loving systems of support for children in care.

Terri-Anne Hamer: Terri-Anne's fellowship, based on travel to Denmark and Jamaica, will explore trauma-informed support for care-experienced parents. It aims to reduce unnecessary child removals and to help these parents understand how their own trauma may affect their parenting journey.

Tiegan Boyens: Tiegan's fellowship will explore ideas that promote connection and understanding in adoption to minimise negative outcomes. Based on research in Europe and Australia, Tiegan's work will explore innovative, therapeutic approaches to adoption that support meaningful connections.

View related resources from the Children and Young People with Experience of Care Fellowships here.

From participation to practice: how young people and practitioners build skills for navigating conflict

Coram LEAP Confronting Conflict

About the Leadership & Enterprise Programme

The Leadership & Enterprise programme supports young people and the adults who support them to develop practical skills for navigating conflict, strengthening communication, and building healthier relationships. Across a series of interactive workshops, participants explore topics such as emotional regulation, understanding needs, boundaries, facilitation, and leadership in youth settings.
The programme blends experiential learning with reflection, smallgroup discussion and practicebased activities. Sessions are cofacilitated with young people wherever possible, creating a learning environment that is collaborative, youthcentred and grounded in realworld application. Many participants join both the core programme and the Facilitator Development pathway, which gives them opportunities to practice new skills in schools and community settings.

This approach is experiential, reflective and codesigned, and creates conditions where participants can develop confidence, test out new tools, and reshape how they communicate with others.

The journeys below from Clara and Michelle illustrate how this way of learning supports meaningful growth for both young people and adults.

A young person growing into leadership

Clara joined the programme through the Lambeth Violence Reduction Unit's Young People's Action Group. Already interested in social justice, she wanted to build skills that would help her support others and navigate challenging conversations.

One tool that resonated deeply with her was the practice of separating *facts* (what happened) from *interpretations* (the meaning or emotion we attach to events). Being able to make this distinction helped her feel calmer and more grounded — whether at university, during her tutoring work, or in everyday interactions.

What made this impactful for Clara was the programme's approach: sessions created space to practise the tools with peers, reflect on what came up, and apply them to real situations. This allowed the learning to move from theory into lived experience.

Clara later joined the Facilitator Development Programme, learning alongside adults of all ages. Even as the youngest in the group, the participatory delivery style made her feel respected and able to contribute openly. As part of the programme, she delivered a workshop in a secondary school, gaining first-hand experience of using the tools with other young people.

Her journey shows how structured participation - supported by practical tools, supportive group learning and opportunities to practise can help young people step into leadership roles with confidence.

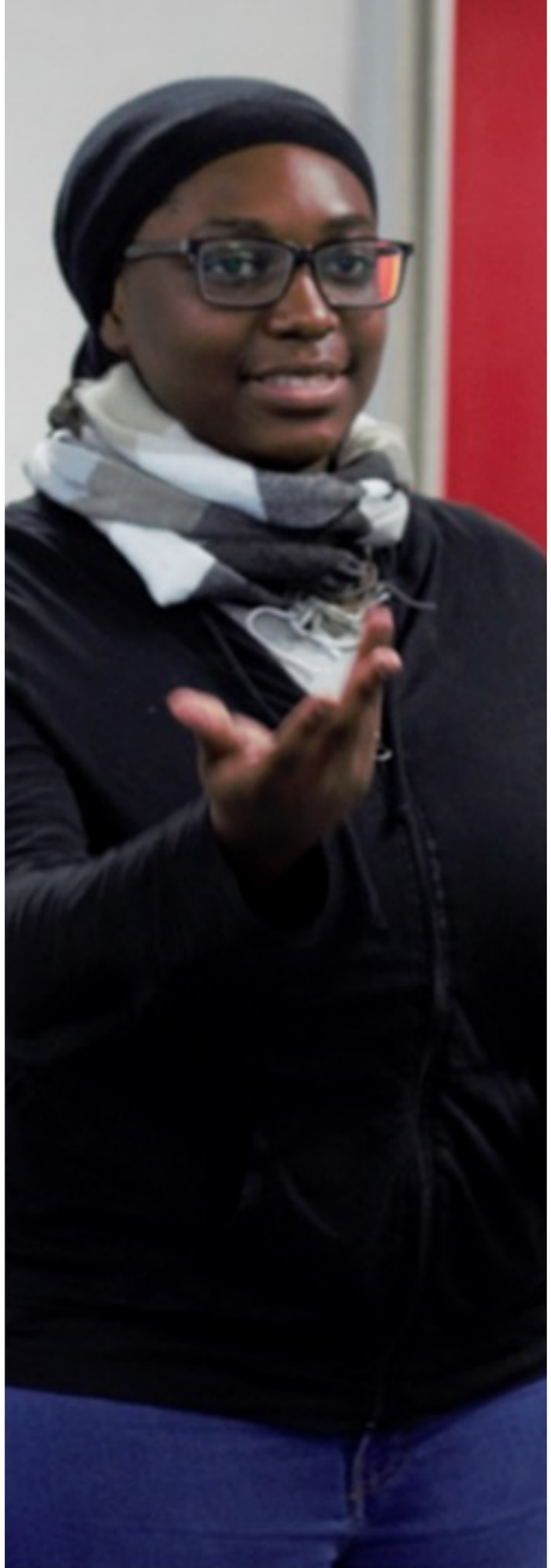
A practitioner strengthening youthcentred practice

Michelle is a youth worker and safeguarding lead with over 20 years of experience. For her, the programme provided something often missing in frontline work: protected space to pause, reflect and rethink longheld habits.

Through exercises focused on listening, pacing, and emotional awareness, she found herself shifting from "getting through tasks" to being more responsive to what young people needed in the moment. The experiential style of the training helped her notice her own patterns, experiment with alternatives, and see immediate changes in her practice.

She became more intentional in how she communicated — using clearer language, slowing down, adapting activities for neurodiverse young people, and checking in more regularly to make sure everyone felt safe and included. The programme also strengthened her boundaries and her confidence when working with parents, professionals and young people.

For Michelle, it wasn't just the content but the way it was delivered: collaboratively, reflectively and with real-time practice, that enabled these shifts.



coram LEAP
CONFRONTING CONFLICT

Shared learning: conflict as a tool for growth

Both Clara and Michelle described a shift in how they understand conflict. Rather than viewing it as something to avoid, they began to see it as a normal and often useful part of life.

Group activities, reflective dialogue and opportunities to practise the tools helped them recognise that when handled safely and with curiosity, conflict can:

- deepen selfawareness
- build empathy
- strengthen relationships
- support clearer communication
- create more equitable group dynamics

Their stories show that when young people and adults learn these skills side by side:

- young people grow in confidence and agency
- adults become more adaptable and reflective
- communication becomes more honest and grounded
- boundaries become clearer and healthier
- participation becomes more genuine and rooted in real relationships

What this means for those working with young people

These journeys highlight the impact of combining practical tools, reflective practice and opportunities for realworld application. When youth workers and young people learn together in this way, they develop shared language, stronger relationships and greater capacity to navigate challenging moments.

Embedding these approaches into everyday youth work, education and community practice can create environments where young people feel heard, supported and better able to handle conflict, and where adults feel more confident, intentional and responsive.

Removing practical barriers to using the Setting Up Home Allowance

Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council and Coram Voice

In April 2023, Coram Voices' A National Voice (ANV), England's national children in care council, launched the 'Grand Campaign' focusing on the Setting Up Home Allowance after the Government announced it was increasing the amount from £2000 to £3000. Care-experienced young people reported that support varied widely across the country: They were receiving different amounts, often lacked clarity about what the allowance could be used for, and were unsure how to access it. In response, ANV produced a report containing local and national recommendations aimed at improving both policy and practice.

Following this, Coram Voice invited local authorities to engage in more detailed work across 2025. They provided online sessions for local authorities to come together with care leavers, one-to-one catch-ups, guidance, and conversation tools to support consultation with their own young people. The aim was not to impose a single solution, but to help Local Authorities explore how the allowance could work better for care leavers, drawing on lived experience.

Why Barnsley got involved

Barnsley's early conversations with care leavers showed the problem wasn't just the amount of money. Young people faced practical barriers: they couldn't spend their allowance directly because purchases had to go through a personal adviser with a procurement card, causing delays and missed deals. Experiences also varied by worker, as no clear process existed. Council rules preventing cash purchases further limited access to cheaper options like Facebook Marketplace.

Listening to young people and decision makers together

Barnsley involved young people in shaping change. Care leavers joined a Corporate Parenting Panel takeover, presenting real-life scenarios on balancing the Setting Up Home Allowance with everyday costs. They highlighted practical challenges, such as flooring and property conditions, and suggested improvements. Their feedback was used to create an action plan for the Corporate Parenting Operational Group.

Understanding the real problem

Discussions revealed a key issue: properties were often allocated with worn carpets removed, leaving homes technically ready but not practically liveable. Young people had to spend much of their Setting Up Home Allowance immediately on flooring, leaving little for essential household items. This meant starting independent living without basic furniture or equipment, affecting comfort, wellbeing, and whether the home felt welcoming.

Developing solutions

Rather than waiting for long-term policy changes, Barnsley focused on practical solutions to stretch the allowance immediately. Working with housing providers and local organisations, they reduced avoidable costs: care leavers could borrow a carpet cleaner to make some properties liveable without spending their allowance, and Berneslai Homes improved property conditions and provided suitable flooring where possible.

Partnering with Help Out Barnsley also gave access to affordable furniture and low-cost flooring, helping young people prioritise essential household items.

Rather than waiting for a long policy process, Barnsley focused on solutions that could improve young people's experiences immediately. The aim was to help the allowance stretch further in practice while longer-term changes were explored.

Wider improvements

The work led to wider changes beyond housing. Barnsley recognised that strict purchasing rules limited the allowance's effectiveness, as young people couldn't access cheaper second-hand items. Working with finance and corporate parenting teams, they introduced a controlled approach giving care leavers up to £300 in cash for small sellers or online marketplaces.

Additional support plans include a care leavers pantry for discounted food and a tool library, letting young people borrow rather than buy essential items.

Learning and reflections

Barnsley found many challenges were caused by systems, not funding. Spending restrictions created unintended barriers for young people.

Involving young people and corporate parents helped decision makers see the real impact of processes, showing that practical procedural changes can greatly improve the allowance's effectiveness.



coramVoice
getting young voices heard

What happens next

Barnsley views this work as an ongoing programme rather than a finished project. They are exploring a formal Setting Up Home Allowance policy for greater consistency, while continuing to monitor how changes are working in practice.

The service is also working with local retailers, housing providers, and partners to reduce costs and expand support, while refining the flexible funding approach to allow greater access within audit requirements.

Advice to other local authorities

Barnsley stressed the importance of early senior and corporate parenting support, especially for changes like flexible funding that required finance and auditor reassurance. Involving decision makers directly – such as through the Corporate Parenting Panel – helped them see the real-life impact of processes.

Focusing on practical barriers and collaborating across housing, finance, and corporate parenting teams enabled changes that made the allowance more effective in everyday life for young people.

To find out more, contact emma.hosking@coramvoice.org.uk.

Moving the Box: Re-thinking equity in the early years

Coram Hempsall's

In recent years, the ambition to close the opportunity gap in early education has become increasingly urgent. National data continues to show that while overall attainment in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) has improved, too many children, particularly those experiencing disadvantage, still start school without a Good Level of Development (GLD).

Against this backdrop, Coram Hempsall's Moving the Box project offers a timely and distinctive response: one that challenges assumptions about fairness, questions "one size fits all" approaches, and places equity firmly at the centre of early years practice.

At its core, Moving the Box is built on a simple but powerful idea that equality, giving every child the same support, does not always lead to fair outcomes. Equity, by contrast, requires educators to understand individual starting points and to respond proportionately, even if that means doing something different or additional for some children. Drawing upon the now-familiar metaphor of children trying to see over a fence, the programme argues that success comes not from offering identical provision, but from "moving the box" so that every child has a genuine opportunity to thrive.

Developed and delivered by Coram Hempsall's in partnership with local authorities throughout the past year, Moving the Box has been working directly with early years leaders and practitioners to strengthen curriculum design, pedagogy and professional confidence. Under the leadership of early education specialist Jan Dubiel, the programme focuses on helping educators make informed, intentional decisions about what to teach, how to teach it, and (crucially) which children need the greatest level of support to succeed. It is not a short-term intervention or a set of prescribed activities, but a structured, reflective approach that empowers settings and early educators to own and grow their curriculum in ways that respond to their unique context.

Currently operating across multiple local authority areas in England, Moving the Box supports hundreds of early years settings and reaches thousands of children identified as being at risk of not achieving a GLD. Its aim aligns closely with the Government's Best Start in Life strategy ambition to increase the proportion of children reaching a GLD to 75% by 2028 and goes further by asking how those gains are achieved, and for whom they matter most. In doing so, Moving the Box reframes improvement not as raising averages alone, but as changing trajectories for individual children whose outcomes might otherwise be constrained by circumstance.

During 2025-2026, the programme has worked with the local authorities, providers, and schools in Durham, Sandwell, Westmorland and Furness, Cumberland, East Sussex, and

Sefton. With sign-ups for 2026-2027 increasing steadily to make the programme bigger and better for the year ahead.

We offer continuous professional development that supports EYFS provision to strengthen the leadership of early years practice and improve knowledge and understanding of early years curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. Enhancing the ability of senior leaders to ensure and assure the quality of early years provision. This needs much reflection on exploring and defining values and aspirations for children and understanding and articulating the needs of children in EYFS provision. A key outcome is the creation of an evidence base of effective practice to demonstrate: What an effective curriculum should look like and how it is developed, designed and implemented in the context of the provision. How this is most effectively delivered. And how this relates to supporting outcomes.

Find out more: **https://www.coramhempsalls.org.uk/hey-title/moving-the-box**

Contact: Cevil Bishop at **cevil.bishop@coramhempsalls.org.uk**





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The Thomas Coram Foundation for Children (registered charity no. 312278) was established by Royal Charter in 1739.