

# Children in care

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## Introduction

A child who has been in the care of their local authority for more than 24 hours is known as a looked after child.

Looked after children are also often referred to as children in care, a term which many children and young people prefer.

[> Find out more about language and children in care in our Why language matters blog](#)

There are many thousands of children in care in the UK and the overall numbers have been increasing over the past decade.

[> Read our Children in care: statistics briefing to find out more about the range of data available](#)

Many children in care have experienced abuse, neglect or other forms of trauma.

It's important that children in care are provided with the care and support they need to be healthy and safe, have the same opportunities as their peers and move successfully into adulthood.

## Types of care

Each UK nation has a slightly different definition of a looked after child and follows its own legislation, policy and guidance. But in general, looked after children are:

- living with foster parents/carers
- living with friends or relatives, through kinship foster care
- living in a residential children's home
- living in residential settings like schools, secure units or semi-independent living accommodation
- in some cases, living with their parents.

Scotland's definition also includes children under a supervision requirement order. This means that many of the looked after children in Scotland are still living at home, but with regular contact from social services.

A child stops being 'looked after' when they are adopted, return home or turn 18. However local authorities in all the nations of the UK are required to support children leaving care at 18 until they are at least 21. This may involve them continuing to live with their foster family.

Not all children in the care of someone other than their parents have 'looked after' status. For example, they may be in private kinship care or cared for under a special guardianship order.

Private kinship care is an arrangement made directly between the parent(s) and the relative, friend or connected person, without the involvement of the local authority.

Special guardianship is when a local authority places a child to live with someone other than their parent(s) on a long-term basis. It aims to provide more security than long-term fostering for children where adoption is not the best option. Special guardianship orders are not available in Scotland.

## Reasons children are in care

There are a variety of reasons why children enter care.

- Children's services may have intervened because they felt the child was at significant risk of harm. If this is the case the child is usually the subject of a court-made legal order.
- The child's parents might have agreed to this – for example, if they are too unwell to look after their child or if their child has a disability and needs respite care.
- The child could have been lost, abandoned or there may be no one with parental responsibility available to care for them; as is the case for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
- The child may have been charged with a criminal offence and temporarily placed on remand in the care of the local authority.

# Impact of being a child in care

Children in care come from a range of different backgrounds and have varied experiences of care. Each child has their own different and specific sets of needs. However, research can give us an insight into how their experiences before and during care makes them a particularly vulnerable group.

[> Find out what data is available about looked after children in our statistics briefing](#)

## Previous experiences of abuse and other forms of trauma

Many children who enter care have been abused, neglected or experienced other forms of trauma. For example, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children have often experienced trauma in their home country or during their journey to the UK.<sup>1</sup>

These experiences can leave children with complex emotional and mental health needs, which can increase their vulnerability to abuse.<sup>2, 3</sup>

## Separation and estrangement from family and friends

Relationships between family members including siblings are among many children's most enduring and significant relationships. However, contact with the care system can lead to

separation and estrangement from siblings for many children.<sup>4, 5, 6</sup>

Events such as moving to a new home, new area or new school can also significantly disrupt friendships and other support networks.

## Educational instability

Contact with the care system often means that children have to change schools. This can impact children's educational stability:

- they might have to change or drop the subjects they take
- it can disrupt exam and coursework preparation
- they may have to miss school.

The added stress from these changes can negatively impact children's mental health and well-being.<sup>7</sup>

"I moved schools when I went into foster care, and I don't fit in at all. I've got no friends, no one will sit with me in lessons. I just spend lunchtime in the toilets crying. I don't feel like I can tell my foster carers how depressed I'm feeling, I don't want to mess this up."

## **Childline counselling session with a girl aged 16**

### **Placement unsuitability and instability**

There is a lack of suitable homes available for children in care.<sup>8</sup> This means children sometimes end up staying in placements which are unable to meet all their needs.

Children are sometimes placed far away from their home, friends, school and family due to a lack of suitable placements in their local area. This can have a significant impact on a child's life, disrupting the positive relationships and connections they have developed in their home area.<sup>9</sup>

Many children move repeatedly in and out of care, or between placements. Placement breakdowns can have a detrimental impact on a child's emotional wellbeing and mental health. It can also prevent them forming stable relationships with the adults who could help protect them.<sup>10</sup>

A lack of available and suitable homes in the right areas can sometimes mean that children are placed in unregistered children's homes. Without being registered, these homes are operating illegally and aren't subject to regulatory oversight.<sup>[11121314](#)</sup>

Unregistered homes may be provided by independent sector operators or local authorities. They can include houses, supported

accommodation and holiday rentals.<sup>15</sup> Without professional oversight, safeguarding and child protection concerns in these placements are less likely to be identified, monitored and responded to by professionals.

## Peer violence and abuse

Many children in care have previous experiences of violence, abuse or neglect. This can lead to them displaying challenging behaviour and having problems forming secure relationships. Some find it hard to develop positive peer relationships. The care system can struggle to provide effective management and interventions to address these problems.<sup>16</sup>

## Going missing

Children may run away from care for all sorts of reasons. These include:

- wanting to return home to their family
- being unhappy or bored in their care placement
- feeling like they didn't have enough control over their own lives.

“I’m struggling to deal with my mum not turning up to meet-ups. Each time it happens I feel convinced I’ll never see my family again. I end up having panic attacks and running

away from placement to cope. Then I get punished for running. My social worker is understanding but I need better ways to cope.”

### **Childline counselling session with a boy aged 13**

Children who go missing from care are at greater risk of physical abuse, grooming and sexual exploitation.

Children can also go missing from care as a consequence of exploitation. Evidence suggests young people living in children’s homes are sometimes specifically targeted for exploitation; and children who have been trafficked into the UK often go missing within days or weeks of being taken into care due to the ongoing power their traffickers hold over them.<sup>17</sup>

[> Find out more about protecting children from trafficking and modern slavery.](#)

## **Comparisons with other groups of children**

Research suggests that when children in care are compared with children who have not been in care, they tend to have poorer outcomes in a number of areas such as educational attainment and mental and physical health.<sup>18</sup>

However, this is not necessarily the case when they are compared with other groups of children who are likely to have had similar experiences,

such as children in need. One study, which analysed Government data, found that looked after children who were continuously in care in England had better educational attainment than children in need.<sup>19</sup>

[> Read our briefing on what data and statistics are available about children in care](#)

## Intersectionality

# Taking an intersectional approach

Children in care, like all children, have diverse identities. As well as experiencing prejudice or bias related to being in care, they might experience challenges relating to other parts of their identity, such as:

- ethnicity
- sexuality
- gender
- disability
- mental health
- where they live, how much money they have and how much access they have to education.

The way these challenges interact is known as intersectionality.

For example, research found that while on average care-experienced children had much more youth justice involvement than non-care-experienced children, care-experienced Black and Mixed ethnicity children had even higher levels of involvement.<sup>[20](#)</sup>

It can be difficult for children to cope with this, and it can have a negative impact on their welfare.

Research has also found that the needs and experiences of care-experienced children who have disabilities or long-term health conditions aren't always fully recognised or understood by professionals.<sup>[21](#)</sup>

“I’m really missing my mum at the moment. I want to see her, but she doesn’t want to see me just yet. She couldn’t cope with my disabilities and got angry with my autism. My foster family are supportive and always try to make sure I’m ok, but I get anxious when I try to say how I’m feeling.”

### **Childline counselling session with a girl aged 12**

[> Listen to our podcast episode on intersectionality in social work practice](#)

Learning for practitioners:  
understanding the child

When you're working with a child, consider all the factors that might influence their safety and wellbeing. Take the time to get to know them, understand their lived experience and how they might face risks due to how others might perceive their identity.

You could consider creating safe spaces for children who have similar identities or come from the same community. This might help them talk about their experiences and get peer support.

Find out more about:

- [safeguarding children who come from Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic communities](#)
- [safeguarding LGBTQ+ children and young people](#)
- [safeguarding children with special educational needs and disabilities \(SEND\)](#)
- [safeguarding d/Deaf and disabled children and young people](#)
- [child mental health](#).

Support

## Supporting children in care

Providing children in and on the edge of care with the support they need, when they need it, can help them to achieve their potential.

# Deciding whether a child should enter care

Delays in decision-making can prolong children's experiences of abuse and neglect. This means that when they do enter care they can experience greater degrees of difficulty, and the specialist services they require are less likely to have an impact.<sup>22</sup>

Our Infant and Family Teams (IFT) service helps social workers and judges decide whether a child on a care plan should stay with their birth family or enter care permanently.

The IFT bring together specialists in infant mental health and social care and works with a family over a 9- to 15-month period to help reunite the child with their family where possible or place them permanently into care if not.

[> Find out more about the work of the Infant and Family Teams](#)

## Children on the edge of care

Our publication Promoting the wellbeing of children in care identifies ways to better safeguard children on the edge of care:

- improving understanding of how to identify damaging situations
- improving decision making about when it is in a child's best interests to enter care ensuring that decisions are well planned and taken in a timely fashion.

Achieving these aims requires:

- greater use of multi-agency approaches to assessment and support for children and families on the edge of care
- revised training for social workers and other practitioners to ensure an improved understanding of:
  - child development
  - the identification of risk and protective factors
  - parental capacity to change
- improvements in undergraduate and post-qualification training to ensure that social workers and other professionals are also able to develop a better understanding of the impact of care and effective interventions
- greater effort to ensure stability for children on the edge of care and following their entry to care.<sup>23</sup>

[> Read the Promoting the wellbeing of children in care report via our library catalogue](#)

## Deciding on the right placement for the child

Every child in care has their own individual strengths and needs. To identify the right placement requires effective assessment, planning and a willingness to listen to the voice of the child and their family.<sup>24</sup>

Deciding on the best available placement is key to achieving stability and permanence and can have an important impact on the outcomes for the child.

## Supporting children in care

Providing a secure, caring environment can help looked after children overcome their early life experiences.

Local authorities have a statutory duty to support the children in their care and every local area should have a range of support available to meet their children's needs.

NSPCC research has identified five priorities for change to improve the emotional and mental health of looked after children.

- **Embed an emphasis on emotional wellbeing throughout the system.** Professionals working in the care system need the skills and knowledge to understand how they can support the emotional wellbeing of children in care.
- **Take a proactive and preventative approach.** Support for looked after children should begin with a thorough assessment of their emotional and mental health needs.
- **Give children voice and influence.** Children in care need more opportunities to identify what is important to them and influence their own care.
- **Support and sustain children's relationships.** Children's carers require

training and support to be sensitive, understanding and resilient.

- **Support care leavers' emotional needs.**

Help young people identify and strengthen their support networks.<sup>25</sup>

If a child or young person needs confidential help and advice direct them to Childline. Calls to 0800 1111 are free and children can also [contact Childline online](#) or [read about living in care on the Childline website](#). You can also download [Childline posters](#).

Feelings of isolation and loneliness can affect any child or young person, but those in care can be particularly at susceptible. The NSPCC's Building Connections programme is an online service for young people up to the age of 19, empowering them to find a way through loneliness.

[> Find out more about how Building Connections can help](#)

## Supporting the birth family

It's important for professionals to support the child's birth family, to address the problems which resulted in the child entering care. In time, many children can return home to their family but even if this is not possible their birth family are still likely to be a central part of their lives.

The quality of contact a child has with their birth family can have an impact on their wellbeing, so it's important to support children to have safe,

positive contact with their birth families if it is in the child's best interests.<sup>26</sup>

## Children and young people leaving care

# Children and young people leaving care

## Returning a child home from care

For many children, returning home from care is the best possible outcome. But research shows that for others this can result in further abuse or neglect.<sup>27</sup>

Many children end up back in care, and a significant number move back and forth between care and their family. Other children remain at home despite continuing abuse or neglect.

There are a number of ways to improve a child's experience of returning home from care:

- Assessing the needs of the family so support can be tailored and in place before and after a child returns home.
- Assessing the risks the family could pose to their child, how much they are able to change and their ability to protect their child from harm. The assessment should consider the family's history as well as the current situation.

- Working with the child and their family to help strengthen their relationship.
- Agreeing with the parents, in writing, what needs to happen before and after their child returns home.
- Providing tailored support and services for the child and their family before and after the return home for a minimum period of 6 months (as recommended in the NSPCC Reunification Framework). This should include support from foster/residential carers, the child's school, and friends.
- Returning the child home gradually, and putting in place plans for what will happen if the return is not going well.
- Monitoring how the child and their family are doing.

## Reunification practice framework

Our Reunification practice framework, created in partnership with University of Bristol, supports practitioners and managers to apply structured professional judgement to decisions about whether and how a child should return home from care.

The framework also helps families and workers to understand what needs to change, to set goals, access support and services and review progress. [28](#)

[> Find out more about the Reunification practice framework](#)

## Supporting care leavers

For some looked after children, leaving the care system can be a challenging time.

In all nations of the UK, children leaving care at 18 are entitled to support from their local authority until they are at least 21. England and Wales are governed by the [Children \(Leaving Care\) Act 2000](#) and there is separate legislation for Scotland ([Children and Young People \(Scotland\) Act 2014](#)) and Northern Ireland ([The Children \(Leaving Care\) Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2002](#)).

For some children this will mean staying on with their foster carers. For others alternative accommodation options will be required.

Local authorities across the UK have a duty to assess and meet care leavers' individual needs and to develop a pathway plan, setting out the support that will be provided to the care leaver once they have left care. This should include making sure the care leaver has somewhere suitable to live.

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, care leavers are also legally entitled to a personal adviser to help with the transition.

# Legislation, policy and guidance

There is legislation and guidance in each nation of the UK that sets out how the child protection system works and what agencies' responsibilities are to children and families who need support.

Find out more about the child protection system in:

- [England](#)
- [Northern Ireland](#)
- [Scotland](#)
- [Wales](#).

There is specific legislation, policy and guidance relating to children in care and care leavers.

## Key legislation

### England and Wales

The [Children Act 1989](#) underpins the way the care system works in England and Wales.

The [Children \(Leaving Care\) Act 2000](#) introduced new duties in England and Wales around putting in place plans to promote the wellbeing of looked after children after they cease to be in care.

## The [Children and Young Persons Act 2008](#)

introduced reforms to the care system in England and Wales. These included:

- making it explicit that placement with a parent is the preferred option, followed by kinship care
- extending local authority duties to children leaving care, including those over 21 who return to education or training
- requiring children's services to arrange for looked after children to have an independent visitor where it is considered in the child's best interests.

## England

The [Care Planning, Placement and Case Review \(England\) Regulations 2010](#) set out the responsibilities of local authorities to plan the care and improve the outcomes of children in care.

The [Children and Families Act 2014](#) introduced a number of changes to the care system in England including:

- introducing 'fostering for adoption' to allow approved adopters to foster children while they wait for court approval to adopt
- setting a 26-week limit for care proceedings
- establishing 'staying put' arrangements to enable young people to continue living with their foster carers if they wish until the age of 21
- replacing residence and contact orders with child arrangement orders, which specify where

a child is to live and who they are to spend time with.

The [Children and Social Work Act 2017](#)

introduced further reforms relating to looked after children, including:

- setting out seven corporate parenting principles around local authorities' responsibilities towards looked after children
- requiring local authorities to publish a 'local offer' for care leavers, and provide care leavers with a personal advisor up to the age of 25
- requiring courts to consider the impact of harm on children and their current and future needs when making decisions about long term placements.

## Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, [The Children \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1995](#) sets out the duties, powers and responsibilities of local authorities regarding looked after children.

The [Children \(Private Arrangements for Fostering\) Regulations \(Northern Ireland\) 1996](#) set out how arrangements should be made for fostering a child privately.

The [Children \(Leaving Care\) Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2002](#) sets out Health and Social Care Trusts' responsibilities for young people leaving care, including:

- the duty to assess and meet young people's individual needs
- providing personal advisers and develop pathway planning for young people up to the age of 21 (or beyond if continuing in education)

The [Children \(Leaving Care\) Regulations \(Northern Ireland\) 2005](#) provides more detail on assessing and meeting the needs of young people preparing to leave care and care leavers.

## Scotland

The [Foster Children \(Scotland\) Act 1984](#) sets out provisions for foster care in Scotland.

In Scotland, the [Children \(Scotland\) Act 1995](#) sets out the duties, powers and responsibilities local authorities hold in respect of looked after children and care leavers.

The [Looked After Children \(Scotland\) Regulations 2009](#) introduces:

- provisions about care planning, fostering, kinship care and emergency measures
- clarity on when a child can be classed as 'looked after' but still live with their parents.

The [Children and Young People \(Scotland\) Act 2014](#) introduces reforms, including:

- setting out the law on corporate parenting
- the provision of aftercare to young people leaving care on or after their 16th birthday

- making it clear that a young person who is looked after in foster, kinship or residential care is eligible to continuing care in their current placement until they turn 21.

## Wales

The [Social Services and Well-being \(Wales\) Act 2014](#) covers local authorities' duties to children in their care, and family and friends' care. It includes a requirement to support for children leaving care which is equivalent to the support a non-care-experienced child might reasonably expect from their parents.

The [Care Planning, Placement and Case Review \(Wales\) Regulations 2015](#) set out the responsibilities of local authorities to plan looked after children's care.

The [Care Leavers \(Wales\) Regulations 2015](#) make provision about the support to be provided to young people who are no longer looked after by a local authority.

## Strategy and policy

### England

The government's plans to transform children's social care in England through its [Stable homes, built on love](#) strategy<sup>29</sup> identifies six key "missions" to improve the care system:

- ensure strong, loving relationships for care-experienced children
- increase the number of local, high-quality, stable and loving homes
- strengthen and extend corporate parenting responsibilities across the public sector
- improve education, employment and training outcomes for children in care
- increase suitable accommodation for care leavers and reduce homelessness
- reduce disparities in mental and physical health outcomes and improve wellbeing.

The DfE has since published [Keeping children safe, helping families thrive](#), a policy paper outlining the government's commitment to keeping families together and children safe.<sup>30</sup>

The DfE has published a [national kinship care strategy](#),<sup>31</sup> to support kinship carers and children across England. The strategy sets out plans to improve support to grandparents, other family members and wider family networks by launching a kinship financial allowance; creating a new Kinship Care Ambassador role; and improving the visibility of kinship carers.

## Northern Ireland

[A life deserved – a strategy for looked after children](#) aims to improve the well-being of children in care, at risk of entering care and who have recently left care.<sup>32</sup>

## Scotland

[Plan 24-30](#) outlines priority focus areas the Scottish Government has for children in or on the edge of care, to achieve goals set by the Independent Care Review.<sup>33</sup> This includes a local authority duty to ensure that children in care can live with their siblings where appropriate.

## Wales

The [Programme for government 2021 to 2026](#) sets out the Welsh Government's current priorities, including a commitment to, "explore radical reform of current services for children looked after and care leavers".<sup>34</sup> This commitment was built on in the [Declaration of radical reform for children and young people's care](#), developed by Welsh Minsters with Young Ambassadors representing the care experienced community, which sets out the steps needed to promote the rights and wellbeing of children in care.<sup>35</sup>

## Key guidance

### England

Statutory guidance and regulations have been issued under the Children Act 1989 including:

- [Volume 1 - Children Act 1989: court orders](#) provides information about the range of orders available under the Act and the roles of the police and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass)<sup>36</sup>

- [Volume 2 - Children Act 1989: care planning, placement and case review \(PDF\)](#) sets out the functions and responsibilities of local authorities and partner agencies providing support for looked after children and their families<sup>37</sup>
- [Volume 3 - Children Act 1989: transition to adulthood for care leavers](#) is designed to ensure care leavers are given the same level of care and support that their peers would expect from a reasonable parent<sup>38</sup>
- [Volume 4 - Children Act 1989: fostering services](#) sets out the functions and responsibilities of local authorities and independent fostering agencies in relation to fostering services for looked after children<sup>39</sup>
- [Volume 5 - Children's homes regulations, including quality standards](#) offers guidance for those providing residential children's homes for vulnerable children.<sup>40</sup>

The [Children's social care: national framework](#) statutory guidance sets out the purpose and principles of children's social care, as well as the factors that enable good practice and the outcomes that should be achieved for children and families.<sup>41</sup> It is supported by the [Children's social care dashboard](#) which aims to measure how well government and local authorities are achieving these outcomes.<sup>42</sup>

The statutory guidance [Kinship care: framework for local authorities](#) provides local authorities and their staff with recommendations on how best to support children who are cared for by extended family or friends. The guidance details how local authorities should carry out the duties set out in

the Children Act 1989 in relation to children in kinship care.<sup>43</sup> It replaces the statutory guidance [Children Act 1989: family and friends care](#).<sup>44</sup>

[The NICE guideline \[NG205\]](#) published by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) sets out how organisations, practitioners and carers should work together to deliver high-quality care, stable placements, and nurturing relationships for looked after children.<sup>45</sup>

[Applying corporate parenting principles to looked after children and care leavers: statutory guidance for local authorities \(PDF\)](#) sets out seven principles local authorities must follow when supporting children in care and care leavers.<sup>46</sup>

## Northern Ireland

The [Protecting looked after children guidance \(PDF\)](#) advises professionals on managing protection concerns relating to looked after children.<sup>47</sup>

## Scotland

The [Children and Young People \(Scotland\) Act 2014: national guidance on part 12: services in relation to children at risk of becoming looked after, etc](#) gives frontline practitioners, managers and strategic leaders an overview of the legal framework for providing support services.<sup>48</sup>

[Part 10 \(aftercare\)](#) and [Part 11 \(continuing care\)](#) of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act

2014 both have published guidance to explain the provisions.<sup>4950</sup>

Guidance on the Looked After Children (Scotland) Regulations 2009 and the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007 clarifies local authorities' duties.<sup>51</sup>

## Wales

[Part 6 code of practice \(looked after and accommodated children\) \(PDF\)](#) provides guidance to local authorities on supporting looked after children.<sup>52</sup>

## Children missing from care guidance

Looked after children are more likely to go missing than other children and are at greater risk of harm if they do.<sup>53</sup>

The guidance each of the four nations has published includes:

- In **England**, the [Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care \(PDF\)](#) outlines action that local authorities and their partners should take to stop children going missing from home or care and to protect those who do.<sup>54</sup>
- In **Northern Ireland**, the Police Service Northern Ireland (PSNI) and Health and Social Care Board's [missing children protocol](#) aims to ensure the agencies work together effectively in the best interests of the child.<sup>55</sup>

- In **Scotland**, the [National missing persons framework](#) includes provision for children.<sup>56</sup>
- In **Wales**, the [Safeguarding children who go missing from home or care](#) practice guide provides additional information about safeguarding missing children.<sup>57</sup>

## Care leavers guidance

With outcomes for care leavers consistently poorer than for non-care-experienced young people,<sup>58</sup> all four nations in the UK provide support for care leavers.

In addition to the above key legislation and guidance, the following documents are also useful for practitioners:

- In **England**, [Keep on caring: supporting young people from care to independence \(PDF\)](#) sets out government strategy to improve services, support and advice for care leavers.<sup>59</sup> There is also [statutory guidance \(PDF\)](#) for local authorities on the support they must provide care leavers up to the age of 25.<sup>60</sup>
- In **Northern Ireland**, [Standards: leaving care services in Northern Ireland](#) sets out minimum standards for leaving and aftercare services.<sup>61</sup>
- In **Scotland**, [Staying put Scotland: providing care leavers with connectedness and belonging](#) provides guidance for local authorities and other corporate parents.<sup>62</sup>

- In **Wales**, the [When I am ready: good practice guide](#) provides guidance for practitioners involved in making and supporting arrangements for young people leaving care.<sup>63</sup>

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