



RETURNING HOME FROM CARE

What's best for children

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FOREWORD

Care supports and protects some of our most vulnerable children. The majority of children and young people enter care as a result of abuse or neglect and 45 per cent have a diagnosable mental health condition. For these children, care is a vital part of our child protection and family support system.

Good work is happening thanks to dedicated carers and other professionals working with looked after children. There have been significant improvements to our care system in recent years and the government has made improving care a priority. But the care system still fails some of our most vulnerable children, with too many going on to have poor experiences in care or after they leave.

The NSPCC believes these children deserve more. Better support is needed to help these children and young people overcome the effects of the abuse and neglect they have suffered. Care must provide effective therapeutic support for children and young people and protect them from current and future harm.

Returning home to a parent or relative is the most common outcome for looked after children. However, children continue to face abuse and neglect when they return home. It is vital that we work together – across social work, the judiciary and all other professions working with looked after children – to ensure effective decision making about when it is in a child's best interest to return home and to ensure that they are provided with high quality support to protect them from further harm.

The NSPCC is calling on central and local government to address the risks for children returning home from care. They must improve performance, eliminate variations in practice across local authorities, and increase the support provided to children and their parents. Taken together, these measures could ensure that returns home are successful and that all children are protected from harm.

This document also sets out the work that the NSPCC is carrying out in partnership with local authorities to improve the decision-making process and support for children who return home from care. This is part of our programme of work to improve outcomes for children in care as part of our vision to end child cruelty in the UK.

I would like to thank the children and young people, professionals, and academics who have helped shape the NSPCC's work for looked after children. Together we can improve the lives of all children in care.



Andrew Flanagan

Chief executive, NSPCC

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The most common outcome for children leaving care is to return home to a parent or relative. However, research shows that around half of children who come into care because of abuse or neglect suffer further abuse if they return home, with up to half of those returning to care. Over 70 per cent of children consulted by the NSPCC said they were not ready to return home.

Those children who remain at home can also continue to face significant risk. Research shows that two thirds (62 per cent) of children who returned home remained with a suspected abuser even after concerns had been identified, with 16 per cent of children even remaining at home after confirmed incidents of abuse or neglect.

Despite these problems, returning home from care has not been the focus of significant policy or practice development. Urgent work is needed to improve:

- the quality of assessment about whether, and when, a child should return home from care
- the planning and preparation for a child's return home
- the support available to children and their parents to tackle issues such as drug and alcohol dependency, domestic violence, and to support children and parents' mental health needs.

The NSPCC is working with local authorities to develop and evaluate a new approach to making decisions about children returning home from care, and to improve the support provided to children and their families.

We are calling on central and local government to address the challenges associated with children returning home from care by:

- publishing data about the outcomes for children who return home from care in order to increase transparency and improve performance
- improving the support available to children, young people and their families prior to and following a return home, to tackle problems such as drug or alcohol dependency, domestic violence, mental health conditions and poor parenting
- revising the monitoring arrangements following a child's return home from care to ensure that they are provided with the support they need. Arrangements for monitoring and supporting children after they return home from care should be set out in revised care planning guidance for looked after children
- ensuring that all those working with looked after children, including members of the judiciary, receive training on child development and the impact of reunification decisions, informed by the latest research
- ensuring that outcomes for children who return home from care are central to performance assessments, including Ofsted's assessment of children's services and the management information that is provided to the courts
- working with sector improvement bodies – such as the Children's Improvement Board and Local Government Improvement and Development – to share effective practice about decision making, planning and preparation and support for children who return home from care.

RETURNING HOME FROM CARE

WHY WE NEED TO DO MORE FOR CHILDREN



INTRODUCTION

Last year, over 90,000 children were looked after in England. A majority of these children entered care as a result of abuse or neglect. Care can provide them with a safe, supportive environment that protects them from harm, and which can enable them to thrive. Local authority care is a critical part of our child protection system and can be the right option for children suffering abuse and neglect.

The most common outcome for children leaving care is to return home to a parent or relative. However, for too many children, returning home results in further abuse or neglect and often re-entry into care, causing significant long-term harm.

At the beginning of 2012, the NSPCC interviewed social workers and senior managers and consulted over 200 children and young people in care to better understand the problems associated with children returning home from care, and the action that needs to be taken to improve care for children

and young people¹. These interviews build on recent UK and international research and inform the work we are undertaking with eight local authorities. This includes trialling a new evidence-based assessment process and improving the support for children and their parents. Our aim is to prevent abuse and neglect when children return home and close the 'revolving door' of care.

The NSPCC believes that reunification should only take place where there has been a comprehensive assessment of the child's needs and effective support is provided for children and their parents. It should only take place where it is in the child's best interests and when they will be protected from harm.

There needs to be robust action by central and local government to improve decision making about reunification and to ensure effective support for families and children when a child returns home. This document sets out our proposals for reform.

BACKGROUND

In 2011, 39 per cent of children leaving care in England returned home. This represents over 10,000 children compared to just 3,050 who were adopted.

While returning home from care can provide a loving, supportive environment for children and young people, attempts to return children home from care often fail, causing significant harm to our most vulnerable children.

Children and young people interviewed by the NSPCC reported significant instances of physical and sexual abuse and neglect after they returned home. Research shows that around half of children who entered care as a result of abuse or neglect suffer further abuse if they return home², and between a third and a half of children who return home re-enter care or are accommodated again³. Moreover, repeated efforts are made to return children home even when it is not in their best interests, with

¹ NSPCC interviews were conducted primarily in England. The policy calls in this document are targeted specifically at the government in Westminster and English local authorities. However, the underlying principles apply across the UK.

² Farmer, E., et al (2008) *The Reunification of Looked After Children with their Parents: Patterns, interventions and outcomes*, Report to the Department for Children, Schools and Families, School for Policy Studies, University of Bristol, found that 46% of children who entered care as a result of abuse or neglect suffered further abuse or neglect if they returned home, similar to the 42% of children identified as suffering re-abuse in Sinclair, I., et al (2005) *Foster children: Where they go and how they get on*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers. Farmer, E. and Lutman, E. (2010) *Case management and outcomes for neglected children returned to their parents: a five year follow-up study*, DCSF research briefing, RB214. London: Department for Children, Schools and Families found that 60% of neglected children suffer further neglect when they returned home.

³ Biehal, N. (2006) *Reuniting looked after children with their families: A review of the research*, London: National Children's Bureau,

children often experiencing multiple failed attempts at reunification⁴.

Repeatedly moving in and out of care can profoundly damage our most vulnerable children. Children can be subjected to repeated episodes of abuse or neglect, compounding and intensifying the traumatic experiences and difficulties they face. Children who return to care are rarely able to live with their previous carers⁵, significantly damaging their chances of developing lasting relationships. And as a child gets older their chances of adoption as an option for a secure permanent placement become less and less⁶.

Children who do not re-enter care can face significant danger at home. Farmer et al identified that even when a child's return home did not break down, they experienced poor standards of care in a third of cases⁷.

Even after concerns had been identified 62 per cent of children who returned home remained with a suspected abuser. In 41 per cent of these cases the child was left too long without sufficient investigation or support, and in 16 per cent of cases the child remained at home even after a confirmed incident of abuse or neglect. These children face problems of 'normalisation' of the abuse or neglect they suffer. Practitioners can begin to accept the terrible conditions experienced by the child, and the threshold for subsequent intervention and support becomes higher than when the child was first taken into care.

Local authorities put considerable effort and resources into ensuring children are supported and kept safe. However, it is clear that professionals face significant challenges associated with children returning home and research shows that variation in local authority practice is a bigger factor in determining whether or not a child will return home than the needs of the child⁸.

Children are being returned to homes where they have already been harmed, and where they face significant further risk, without sufficient assessment and preparation. This situation requires our urgent attention if we are to protect our most vulnerable children from further harm.

Despite these difficulties, reunification remains a largely invisible area of practice. Existing guidance on looked after children and leaving care⁹ focuses almost exclusively on the transition to adulthood, with little emphasis on children returning home and the risks they may face.

Evidence from the NSPCC's interviews, and other academic research, highlights significant differences in attitudes to reunification and practice across local authorities. While elements of good practice exist in different local authorities, support for children and young people remains variable across the country as a whole.

NSPCC RECOMMENDATIONS

Central and local government must do more to highlight the difficulties faced by children returning home from care, increase the transparency of outcomes for children who return home from care, and ensure that they are protected from abuse or neglect.

- Care planning guidance for looked after children and care leavers must be updated to address the challenges associated with children returning home from care. It should highlight good practice, including the identification of factors associated with further abuse or neglect if a child returns home, and identify the post-reunification support that should be considered by professionals.
- Central government should publish data about outcomes for children returning home from care – including the numbers who return to care and the reason why they returned – as part of their safeguarding performance information dataset. Local authorities should use this information to monitor support and assess their performance, ensuring that they identify any particularly vulnerable groups such as voluntarily accommodated or older children.
- Outcomes for children who return home from care should form a central part of Ofsted's assessment of the performance of local authority children's services.

⁴ See for example, Sinclair, I., et al (2005) op cit, Wade, J., et al (2010) Research Brief: Maltreated children in the looked after system; A comparison of outcomes for those who go home and those who do not. London: DCSF/DoH. and Farmer, E., et al (2011) Achieving Successful Returns from Care: What Makes Reunification Work?, London, BAAF.

⁵ Hannon, C., et al (2010) In Loco Parentis. London: Demos.

⁶ Selwyn, J., et al (2006) Costs and outcomes of non-infant adoptions, British Association for Adoption and Fostering.

⁷ Farmer, E., et al (2011) op cit

⁸ Wade, J., et al (2011), Caring for Abused and Neglected Children: Making the right decisions for reunification or long-term care, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers..

⁹ The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volumes 2 and 3 (2012), London: Department for Education.

CASE STUDY: LEANNE'S STORY

"I was always pretty academic at school but nothing I did was good enough for Mum and so by the age of 11 I just gave up, I didn't see the point in trying.

We led a very chaotic life – in one year we lived in 12 different places. Our houses were always dirty, my mum had two or three different partners and there were loads of rows, sometimes violent. At the weekend my mum would drink heavily. I was frightened of her when she was drunk as she was really unpredictable.

The lack of support, the constant arguing and bullying at school got too much for me so I ran away from home. I was an 11-year-old girl wandering around by myself at night. I was taken into care but in spite of all of the chaos in her life, Mum wanted to control me. She wanted to control of how much pocket money I had, when I went to bed, and all other parts of my life. After six months I was told I had to leave the foster home.

I was given an hour to prepare before someone from social services came and said that I needed to return home. I didn't want to go back to Mum's and asked to be put into another foster home but I was told that I didn't have a choice.

I wasn't really given any help to support me through the move back home and I found it really difficult. I was assigned an outreach worker who was meant make sure everything was ok. But in reality, if she turned up at all, she would just drop me off at the cinema, pay for me and leave. I wasn't able to build up a relationship with her and didn't feel like I could talk to her.

Things with Mum got worse and worse. She was still drinking, we had constant arguments and the flat was still a mess. I was really unhappy but when I left messages for my social worker she didn't get back to me.

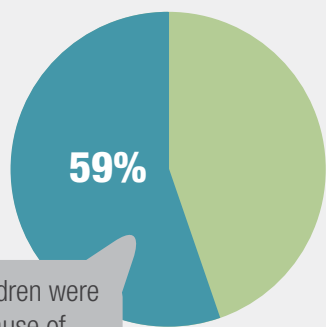
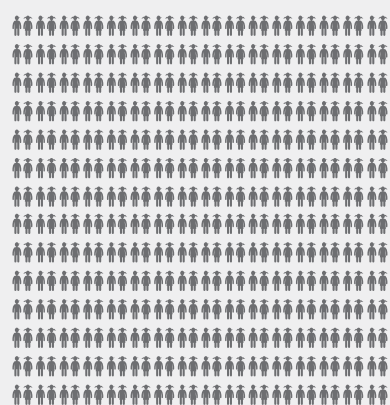
I ran away again when I was 12 and slept rough for three nights. It was freezing and I was terrified that someone would hurt me. But frightened as I was, I couldn't face going home. In the end I was put into another foster home where I stayed until I was 16.

I think that young people should be given the choice as to whether they want to return home. Young people returning home from care need to be given a lot more support – it's a difficult period and often the problems that caused a young person to leave in the first place haven't been resolved. There needs to be counselling available for the young person and their family to ensure that issues are resolved before the young person is put back into that situation. My mum could have benefited from support and help with parenting along with family counselling to allow us to share our feelings and help to resolve our issues."

Names have been changed to protect identity.

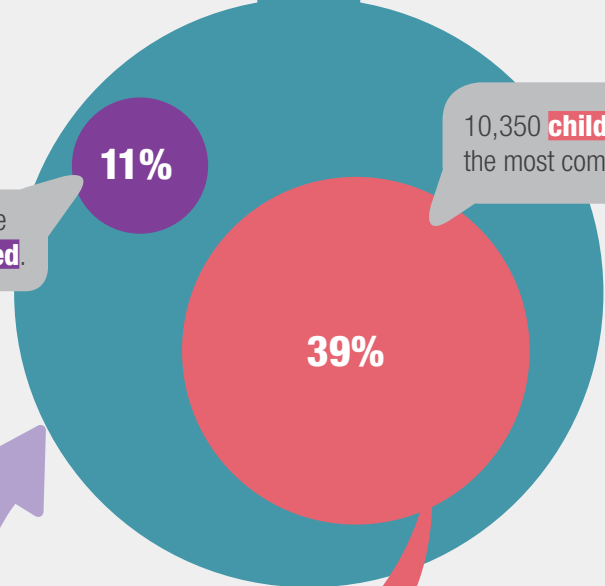
RETURNING HOME FROM CARE

In the year up to 31 March 2011, there were **90,920 children in care** in England.



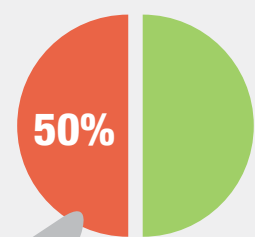
53,642 children were in care because of **abuse or neglect**.

26,830 CHILDREN LEFT CARE*



10,350 **children returned home**: the most common outcome.

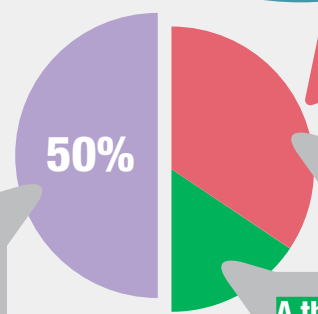
3,050 of those **were adopted**.



Almost half of those who enter care because of abuse or neglect are **abused again if they return home**.

Safe or unreported as suffering abuse or neglect.

Up to half of children return to care because their move home breaks down.



A third of those who remain at home continue to receive poor standards of care, including confirmed incidents of abuse and neglect.

*Children and young people leave care for a range of other reasons including, for example, residence orders, special guardianship and independent living.

THE NSPCC'S INTERVIEWS WITH SOCIAL WORKERS AND SENIOR MANAGERS

Approaches to reunification

At the beginning of 2012, the NSPCC interviewed social workers and senior managers across a number of local authorities. These interviews demonstrate a range of approaches to reunification.

Some authorities placed a greater emphasis on early intervention prior to entry to care and were less likely to consider reunification once a child had entered care. Others have structures in place for regular review panels that actively pursue the possibility of reunification throughout a child's time in care.

Social workers' views vary on whether older children or younger children are more likely to be returned to their families. Some argue that older children often have behaviour management difficulties that make it unlikely they will return home, others say that because of other options for young children and babies, such as adoption, they are unlikely to be returned home.

Social workers identify a range of other reasons that increase the pressure to return children home. They argue that budget cuts mean that expensive placements need reviewing to assess chances of reunification. They also say that courts often judge the balance of the risk to the child against the rights of the parents differently to social workers, and may order children to return home even when social workers argue it is not safe.

Outcomes from reunification

Some managers complain about the lack of monitoring data about outcomes for children who return home. Nonetheless, there is widespread agreement that outcomes can be worse for voluntarily accommodated children than for children on care orders. Social workers say that involvement of the courts for children who are on care orders leads to greater monitoring of the care plan.

Social workers' views on the adequacy of support once a child returns home differed. While some believe that stepping down from care to a supervision order or child in need status ensures some form of continued support, others feel that post-reunification support is inadequate.

Ensuring successful reunification

According to our interviews, one of the greatest difficulties in making choices about a child's permanent placement is actually taking the final decision about whether a child should return home. It requires a significant amount of confidence, and in many cases experience, to make a decision. In the worst cases this means that support for a return home continues despite strong evidence against reunification now, or in the future.

The quality of assessment has an impact on the confidence social workers have in their decision, but assessment is not always as good as it should be. According to our interviews, assessments can be improved in three ways:

- Existing case file information should be used more routinely to identify where families have been in repeated contact with children's services, where support arrangements have failed and succeeded, and where previous attempts at reunification have been made.
- Validated assessment tools need to be better embedded into practice, to ensure that social workers know which tools to use when, and how.
- Supervision should focus on improving the evidence used in assessments and enabling learning. While generally judged to be good, examples of poor supervision were identified.

ADDRESSING PROBLEMS OF REUNIFICATION



PLANNING, PREPARATION AND SUPERVISION

“The reunification was unplanned. The young person walked [left the placement]. There was lots of disruption as we tried to find something suitable, [the child] went to Mum, then to Dad, then back into care. All in a three-month period.”

Local authority social worker

Structured, purposeful planning, and effective supervision of decision making, is critical to ensuring children are successfully returned home from care¹⁰. Yet returns home are often poorly planned and supported¹¹, with inconsistent approaches and different strengths and weaknesses across local authorities¹².

Farmer et al found that a child’s return home from care was only planned in 40 per cent of cases¹³. Social workers interviewed by the NSPCC echoed these findings, with some reporting that their planning processes ensured a structured approach to assessment and reunification, and others indicating a more chaotic approach to planning.

Children and young people interviewed by the NSPCC said they were not consistently involved in the preparation for their return home. 48 per cent said they were not consulted at all about their views on returning home. 73 per cent said they were not ready to return home.

Social workers reported particular concerns for older children who, despite facing significant risks, make the decision to return to their family themselves, and for voluntarily accommodated children for whom planning is often weakest¹⁴.

For these children, returning home can happen for a number of reasons including placement breakdown, children leaving placements, and pressure from parents to end a placement. These returns are often unplanned with inadequate support for the young person and their family. However, research also indicates high levels of breakdown for children who were on care orders¹⁵, indicating the need to ensure high quality support for all children leaving care.

In deciding if a return home is in the child’s best interest, social workers face a range of complex decisions. They have to balance how best to return a child and support them in their family, with the risk of the child being in danger of harm if they return home. Social workers interviewed by the NSPCC stressed the need for strong, supportive supervision to enable them to make effective decisions. However, they said that supervision can place a greater emphasis on process than on the quality of evidence-gathering and analysis. As with most aspects of reunification, interviewees reported significant differences in planning, preparation and supervision across local authorities.

¹⁰ Biehal, N. (2006), op cit

¹¹ Sinclair, I., et al (2005), in Farmer, E., et al (2011) op cit

¹² Wade, J., et al (2011), op cit

¹³ Farmer, E., et al (2008) op cit

¹⁴ Farmer, E., et al (2008) op cit , Wade, J., et al (2011) op cit

¹⁵ Wade, J., et al (2011) op cit

NSPCC RECOMMENDATIONS

It is vital we address the variations in practice for assessment, decision-making and planning for children returning home from care. The elements of good practice must become common across all local authority practice.

- The government should work with sector improvement bodies – such as the Children’s Improvement Board and Local Government Improvement and Development – to gather and share effective practice relating to children and young people returning home from care.
- Lead members and directors of children’s services should ensure that local partners work together to identify the specific local barriers to effective preparation and ensure that decision making and planning for children returning home is improved.
- Local authorities must ensure that children’s views and best interests are central to decisions about returning home from care. Looked after children must be given the opportunity to contribute to decisions about their placement and any return home, with the support of an independent advocate where necessary.

To support this, the NSPCC will share the findings from its project, *Returning home from care: what’s best for children*, which aims to improve reunification assessment, decision-making, planning and support.



ASSESSMENT

“[The] quality of assessments is not always high enough. They lack analysis. We’re good at gathering information but not always good at making sense of it and making a plan.”

Local authority social worker

An effective assessment of risk is directly linked to a child’s successful return home from care¹⁶. However, despite the factors associated with a risk of abuse or neglect being well established¹⁷, social workers interviewed by the NSPCC identified an inconsistent approach to assessment that fails to take account of the risks faced by a child or determine decisions about their return home.

While practitioners understand the risk and protective factors associated with abuse or neglect, their decisions can fail to follow the available evidence. Assessments do not always take account of the risks faced by a child and judgements can be influenced by the practitioner’s personal view of the case²⁰.

Furthermore, many children return home from care without any assessment of their current situation, and the likelihood of an assessment is linked to the care plan drawn up when they first entered care, rather than to the child’s current circumstances²¹.

Where assessment does not happen it can be because it isn’t considered necessary by the child’s social worker, even where there is a known risk of abuse²². Practitioners can experience “misplaced optimism”²³ – over-estimating parents’ understanding of concerns and their ability to make the changes necessary for a child’s safe return home²⁴. Decision makers make extensive efforts to keep families together, continuing to give parents another chance, even when it is contrary to evidence of the risks faced by the child²⁵.

For children on care orders, family courts play a central role in assessing whether a child should return home. Their involvement can lead to improved planning and service provision²⁶. However, courts have been shown to favour parents’ rights over those of the child^{27,28}. Interviewees told the NSPCC that courts often instructed reunification, even when it was not in the best interests of the child, with decision making tipped in favour of the parents rather than the child.

¹⁶ Farmer, E., et al (2011) op cit

¹⁷ Hindley N., Ramchandani P.G. and Jones D.P.H. (2006), Risk Factors for recurrence of maltreatment: a systematic review. Archives of Disease in Childhood

¹⁸ Ward, H., et al (2012), Safeguarding Babies and Very Young Children from Abuse and Neglect, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

¹⁹ See for example Dorsey et al (2009), Caseworker assessments of risk for recurrent maltreatment: Association with case specific risk factors and re-reports, Child Abuse and Neglect; Firkins, A., and Candlin, C., (2006) Framing the Child at Risk, Health, Risk and Society; Munro, E., (1999), Common errors of reasoning in child protection work, Child Abuse and Neglect

²⁰ Horwath, J. (2006), the Missing Assessment Domain: Personal, Professional and Organisational Factors Influencing Professional Judgements when Identifying and Referring Child Neglect, British Journal of Social Work.

²¹ Farmer, E., et al (2011) op cit

²² ibid

²³ Forrester and Harwin (2008), in Farmer, E., et al (2011) op cit

²⁴ Turney, D., et al (2011), Social work assessment of children in need: what do we know? Messages from research, London: Department for Education

²⁵ Ward, H., et al (2012) op cit

²⁶ Farmer, E., et al (2011) op cit

²⁷ Bainham, A. (2011), Interim Care Orders: Is the Bar set too Low?, Family Law

²⁸ Ward, H., et al (2012) op cit

NSPCC RECOMMENDATIONS

All professionals involved in making decisions about if and when a child returns home from care must be supported to ensure decisions are based on clear evidence of the risks to the child, parental capacity to change and attachment between the child and their parent.

- The government should work with the new Health and Care Professions Council to ensure that initial social work training incorporates the latest research on child development, evidence-based decision making and the impact of reunification on children and young people.
- Continuing professional development for social workers and social work managers should cover the latest research on children returning home from care, and the need for effective support and supervision for decision-making.
- Action must be taken to ensure that court decisions are always based on the child's best interests. The new Family Justice Service must ensure that members of the judiciary specialising in family law receive training in child development and the implications of returning home from care. Information made available to the courts must enable members of the judiciary to receive better feedback on the outcome of their decisions.



SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN AND THEIR PARENTS

“Support is crucial. [But] we have to take a pragmatic approach as often the support that has been suggested by the courts or experts is simply not available.”

Social work team manager

Poor parenting, drug or alcohol misuse, domestic violence, and parental mental health problems, all increase the chance of harm when the child returns home. Farmer et al found that 78 per cent of substance-misusing parents abused or neglected their children after they returned from care, compared to 29 per cent of parents without substance misuse problems²⁹.

Effective support can make a difference. Social workers interviewed by the NSPCC said that children returning home from care had positive experiences when support was provided for the parent and child, and other family members when needed. When this support is offered, often as part of a phased return, it can result in sustained change in the parent’s behaviour.

In addition to other services, support from foster carers, residential care workers and services such as schools can help children prepare for, and enjoy, a successful return home³⁰.

However, the support that is provided for children and their families is “often patchy”³¹. Too little help is available for parents to tackle problems such as domestic violence and drug and alcohol misuse, address mental health conditions, or manage their children’s behaviour, even in cases where the problems were so severe that children went into care.

Parents’ problems are often unresolved before a child returns home, and can remain hidden from view. UK studies demonstrate instances of children returning to households with a high recurrence of drug and alcohol misuse (42 and 51 per cent of cases respectively), but where only 5 per cent of parents were provided with treatment to help address these problems³².

Where support is provided it is often removed after a short period of time, before a problem has been sustainably addressed. Alongside resource constraints, support can be removed due to a belief that parents need to be able to shoulder their responsibilities and not become dependent on services³³. Support is often discontinued once a child returns home without any assessment of whether the families’ problems have diminished. This results in further instability and an increased risk of harm to the child. Parents also report concerns about the short-term nature of interventions designed to support them.

²⁹ Farmer, E., et al (2008), op cit

³⁰ Farmer, E., et al (2011) op cit

³¹ Sinclair et al (2005) and Wade et al (2004), cited in Biehal, N. (2006) op cit

³² Farmer, E., et al (2008), op cit

³³ Ward, H., et al (2012) op cit

NSPCC RECOMMENDATIONS

Decisions about whether a child should return home must always be led by what is in their best interests. Support for children and their families prior to and following reunification must improve.

- The government should ensure there is sufficient support for parents who abuse drugs and alcohol, who are victims of domestic violence, who have mental health difficulties or who have other issues which could affect their ability to parent effectively when their child returns from care. Local services must be incentivised to provide sufficient support for these parents.
- Local authorities must ensure that the support provided to children and families matches the needs identified in a child's risk assessment. This information should be used to inform local commissioning and investment decisions.
- Local authorities must ensure that foster carers and residential care workers are involved in the process of a child returning home from care and are supported to help the child prepare for a return home, where that is in their best interests.
- Guidance on designated teachers for looked after children should be revised to include children who return home from care, even if they cease to be looked after on their return. The support provided by the school can play an effective part in successful returns home.

To support this, the NSPCC will share the findings from its project, *Returning home from care: what's best for children*, about the effectiveness of support and value for money to help inform local authorities' investment choices.



MONITORING AND SUPPORT FOLLOWING THE CHILD'S RETURN HOME

“When I return a child home, they are registered as a Child in Need. But I know the case will be closed within a couple of months.”

Local authority social worker

There are often early signs that a return home will fail, with most concerns becoming evident within six months³⁶. These early problems are predictors of poor well-being later in a child's life³⁷.

However, monitoring arrangements are often insufficient and cases can close within six months³⁸, often despite continuing concerns³⁹. Parents report they would welcome further monitoring after their child has returned home⁴⁰ and social workers and managers interviewed by the NSPCC identified that support needs to be provided for longer. However, professionals do have concerns about who is able to provide this help to children and their families.

Support following a child's return home, and ultimately the success and stability of their return, is partly dependent on how a child returns home. Planning, support and monitoring is stronger, for example, for children who return home on care orders than for children who cease to be looked after⁴¹. However, the interviews conducted by the NSPCC identified that practice for monitoring and supporting children after a return home varies significantly between different local authorities. This can significantly affect the quality of support that children and their parents receive.

Despite this, care planning guidance⁴² does not set out best practice arrangements for monitoring the risks faced by children when they return home from care. Given the evidence of variation in practice, further guidance and support is needed to ensure children are supported and protected from harm.

NSPCC RECOMMENDATIONS

Arrangements for monitoring children and young people's needs after they return home must be made clear. All local authorities must have arrangements in place to ensure that support for children and their family is maintained in accordance with the needs of the child.

- The government should revise care planning guidance to set out clear expectations of monitoring and support arrangements after a child returns home from care. These arrangements should ensure that the support provided is in line with the needs of the individual child, for as long as is necessary to ensure their safety. Cases should remain open and actively monitored for a minimum of a year after a child returns home.
- Local authorities should review their arrangements to ensure they provide sufficient support to children and young people after they return home from care. Support must be based on the specific needs of each child, as identified by an evidence-based risk assessment. Monitoring and support should include regular visits from a consistent key worker and the child should have access to advocacy support to ensure their views are heard.

³⁶ Wade, J., et al (2010) op cit found that 35% of children had re-entered the looked after system within six-months of returning home. Wade, J. et al (2011) op cit found that 37% of cases had broken down within six months.

³⁷ Wade, J. et al (2011) op cit

³⁸ Farmer, E., et al (2011) op cit

³⁹ ibid

⁴⁰ Ward, H., et al (2012) op cit

⁴¹ Farmer, E., et al (2011) op cit

⁴² Department for Education (2012), op. cit

CONCLUSION

Our interviews with children and young people indicate that without proper assessment, preparation and support for their return home they are at risk of becoming caught in a pattern of abuse or neglect. They feel as though they move back to square one, without people they can turn to and on whom they can rely. They lose faith in sharing information with children's services and in the support of those who are supposed to be there to protect them.

Care provides a safe environment for some of our most vulnerable children but more needs to be done to ensure that care enables children to overcome the impact of abuse or neglect that they have suffered and that it protects them from further harm.

Children and young people in care deserve stable, long-term placements, enabling them to form secure attachments with those who care for them. Providing proper support for looked after children means we must tackle the risks they face if they return home.





DEVELOPING A NEW APPROACH TO PRACTICE

A NEW APPROACH TO PRACTICE

The NSPCC is working with eight local authorities to develop innovative new practice to tackle the problems associated with children returning home from care.

This work uses evidence from research and analysis of serious case reviews to underpin the development of a new approach to assessment, decision making, planning and monitoring of children returning home from care. The NSPCC will evaluate the impact of new approaches to four key areas of reunification.

Evidence-based risk assessment and decision making

Working with Professor Harriet Ward and Rebecca Brown from the Centre for Child and Family Research at Loughborough University, the NSPCC has developed a new framework for systematically classifying the level of risk faced by a child if they were to return home. This framework places evidence of the risk of further abuse or neglect, and assessment of parental capacity to change, at the heart of decision making about reunification. It provides professionals with a structured approach to decision making, helping to clearly set out their evidence and structure the analysis of a child's circumstances.

Collaborative working, and joint supervision arrangements, between the local authority and the NSPCC aims to improve peer support and scrutiny, enabling a more reflective working practice. The risk framework aims to ensure that the decisions taken focus on the changes necessary to reduce the risk of abuse or neglect should the child return home, and the support needed to achieve this change.

Classifying the risk of reunification – a tool to support decision making about children returning home from care, adapted from *Safeguarding Babies and Very Young Children from Abuse and Neglect* (Ward, Brown and Westlake, 2012)

SEVERE RISK

- Risk factors apparent and not being addressed, no protective factors apparent.
- No evidence of parental capacity to change and ambivalence or opposition to return home by child or parent.

HIGH RISK

- Risk factors apparent, and not being addressed. At least one protective factor apparent.
- No or limited evidence of parental capacity to change and ambivalence or opposition to return home by child or parent.

MEDIUM RISK

- Risk factors apparent or not all risk factors addressed. At least one protective factor apparent.
- Evidence of parental capacity to sustain change. Parents and child both want return home to take place.

LOW RISK

- No risk factors apparent, or previous risk factors fully addressed, and protective factors apparent.
- Evidence of parental capacity to sustain change. Parents and child both want return home to take place.

STRUCTURED PLANNING AND PREPARATION FOR REUNIFICATION

Social workers' assessments will form the basis of ongoing work with the child and their family, rather than providing a snapshot of the level of risk. This will improve the support provided prior to, and following, a child's return home.

Analysis for the risk classification will enable practitioners to provide evidence of any changes that are taking place within the family and identify any further support that needs to be provided.

Each stage of the reunification process is linked through an iterative approach. Ongoing work with the child and parents will enable the local authority to identify whether sufficient progress is being made towards a successful return home. By providing clear evidence of parental behaviour change, the local authority should be better able to determine whether:

- the problems that initially resulted in the child coming into care are being addressed
- parents acknowledge, and are ready and able, to address the risks to the child's safety and wellbeing
- parents are making the necessary changes on an acceptable timescale, taking account of the child's age and developmental needs.

Where the risks faced by the child remain unchanged, local authorities will be better placed to provide evidence for this assessment and prepare the child for alternative permanent placements.

“In contrast with previous assessment models, the new risk classification model identifies specific areas of strengths and weaknesses in families. This enables planning and support services to be targeted more effectively to address areas of risk and need.

It also ensures that changes in parents' behaviour can be measured more accurately and decisions about whether, and when, a child should return home can be made on the basis of clear evidence. Furthermore, it provides clear and specific information for families to help them understand what needs to change if a child is to be able to return home safely.”

Project social worker

Proactive support and monitoring

Reunification plans will set out a clear timetable for decisions about work with parents and a child's return home. This will enable local authorities to improve planning, case management and tackle delays within the care system, identifying the change that has taken place and whether further support is needed.

Local authorities will keep cases open for a minimum of a year following a child's return home, enabling improved support, including that provided by NSPCC. If there is evidence of abuse or neglect after a child has returned home, this approach enables intervention and protective action to happen more quickly. Support can be provided to the child and their family that will reduce the number of unsuccessful attempts at returning the child home from care.

COMMUNICATING WITH CHILDREN AND PARENTS

Effective communication with children and their parents is central to the NSPCC's new approach. Practitioners will work with children and their parents to check their understanding of the plan for reunification, and to establish their wishes, feelings and motivations about a return home.

Research shows that children's views are central to whether or not reunification will be successful but that they are often overlooked. This approach places the views and interests of the child at the centre of decision-making.

Parental agreements are often used in reunification attempts, but they can be poorly constructed and broken without any consequence. This work will evaluate the impact of more effective parental agreements. These will set tangible goals that have clear measures of whether or not they are successfully achieved. There will also be consequences for a failure to achieve these goals, that are clearly communicated to parents.

“It is essential for parents and children to understand the purpose and remit of assessment at the outset. This work provides a transparent basis on which to work and increases their engagement.

We have done this with a written agreement - a clearly and simply worded contract which sets out the reason for our work, the tasks this entails, and the family's rights and responsibilities. With children we have undertaken this in an interactive way by using age-appropriate materials such as games, drawing, pictures and stories. Already, young children have indicated that this has helped them to understand why we are working with them.”

Project social worker

EVALUATION

The NSPCC, in partnership with the Centre for Family and Child Research, will carry out an impact, process and economic evaluation of this work. Our aim is to:

- better understand how to improve the decisions that are made about if and when a child should return home
- strengthen the planning and preparation for reunification
- ensure that children and their parents are provided with the support necessary to keep children safe and enable them to thrive.

The NSPCC will work with partners to share the findings of this work with local authorities across the UK.



Anyone with concerns about a child should contact the NSPCC immediately. We're here 24/7. It's free and you don't have to say who you are.

Call: 0808 800 5000

Email: help@nspcc.org.uk

Text: 88858

Visit: www.nspcc.org.uk/helpline

www.nspcc.org.uk/childrenincare

