




bright spots

## The subjective well-being of children in care and care leavers

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**“Listen to young  
people views  
and thoughts.  
They know  
what’s going on,  
you don’t!”**

(Care leaver)

# About Bright Spots



Partnership between the Rees Centre, University of Oxford & Coram Voice funded by the Hadley Trust.

Subjective well-being chosen as our theoretical framework.

Defined as: “feeling good and functioning well at an individual and interpersonal level”.

Allowed us to examine a basket of indicators that children and young people thought were important for their well-being.

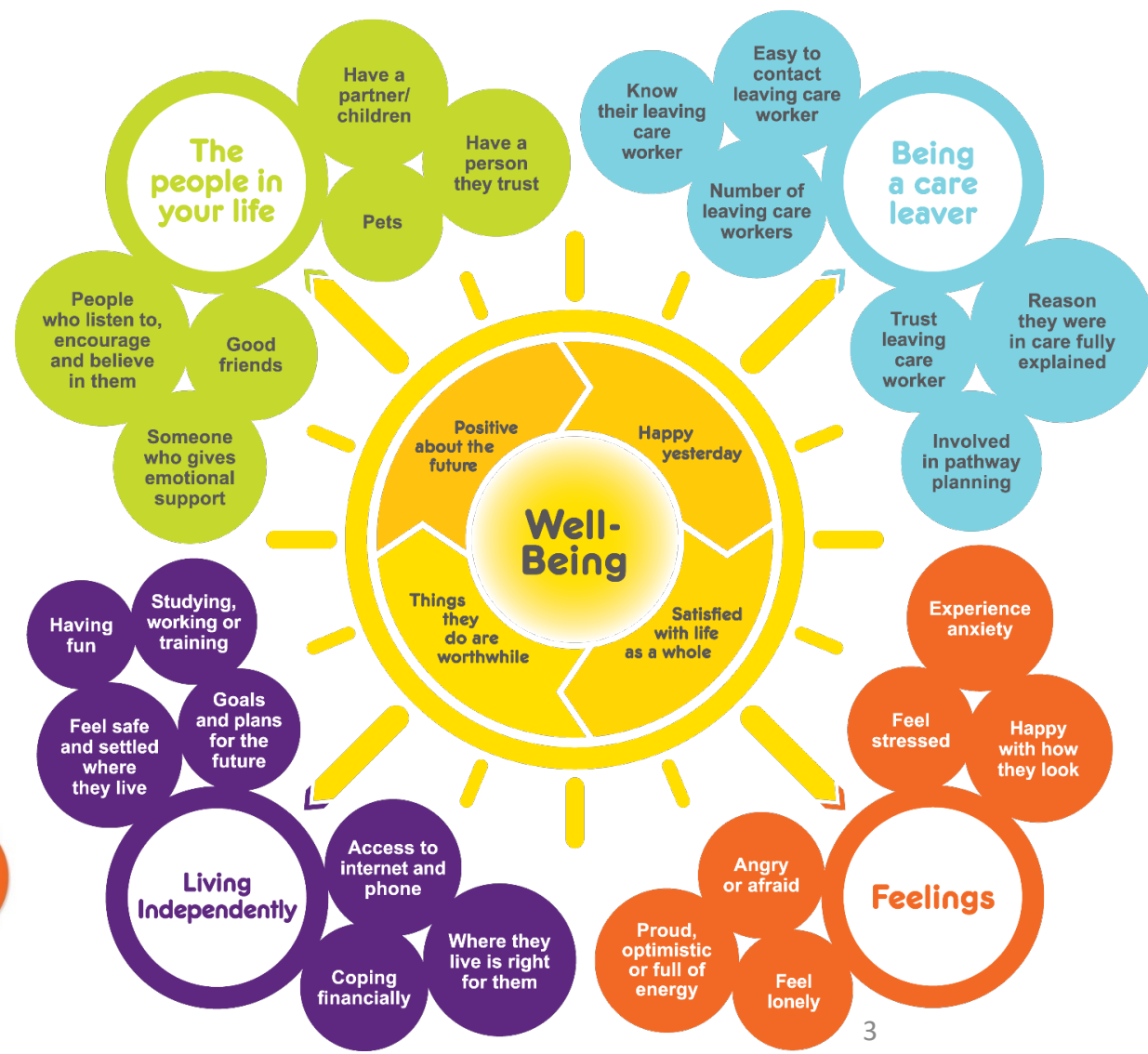
- Co-produced with CYP
  - based on what 170 children in care and care leavers said was important to them
- Evidence based
  - developed over 7 years of research.
  - validated surveys for 4-7yrs 8-11yrs, 11-18yrs, 18-25yrs
  - LAs able to be benchmarked against other LAs and
  - some comparative questions to compare with general population

# Bright Spots domains and indicators of well-being

## Your Life Your Care



## Your Life Beyond Care



# 'Your Life, Your Care' surveys (4-18yrs) validated



Evidence of Reliability  
and Validity

**Accessibility** – template and letters provided to help the LA distribute

**Coherence and comparability** – general population norms & benchmarking against other LAs

**Relevance** – Good face validity (as developed with children), content validity (expert group/LA feedback)

**Reliability** – Cronbach's alpha girls 0.82 and boys 0.77. Little missing data. Factor analysis and IRT completed – a psychometrically robust tool

**Timeliness** – reports received within 4 months

OFSTED - "The local authority is striving to be child focused and to shape its services in response to the wishes and views of children in its care. The annual 'Bright Spot' survey is an effective mechanism for communicating with children, and it has led to new initiatives, ... resulted in improvements in services for children in care and care leavers.



\* Total number of responses collected,

# Research findings



# Many children in care are positive about their lives

I like being in care I am happy and well looked after. 11-18yrs

“I love being in care because the people I live with are very nice and love me very much.” (8-11yrs)

82%

‘Life is getting better.’  
(8-18yrs)

I feel guilty for feeling happy and safe in care.

I now know what a normal family do, say and treat each other. I love it here!  
11-18yrs

Compared with the general population a larger percentage of children in care felt safe where they lived.



My foster carers rear me like their own daughter in the family which is really nice because I feel safe (11-18yrs)

'I trust the adults that I live with.'  
\*All of the time or sometimes



96%  
(4-18yrs)

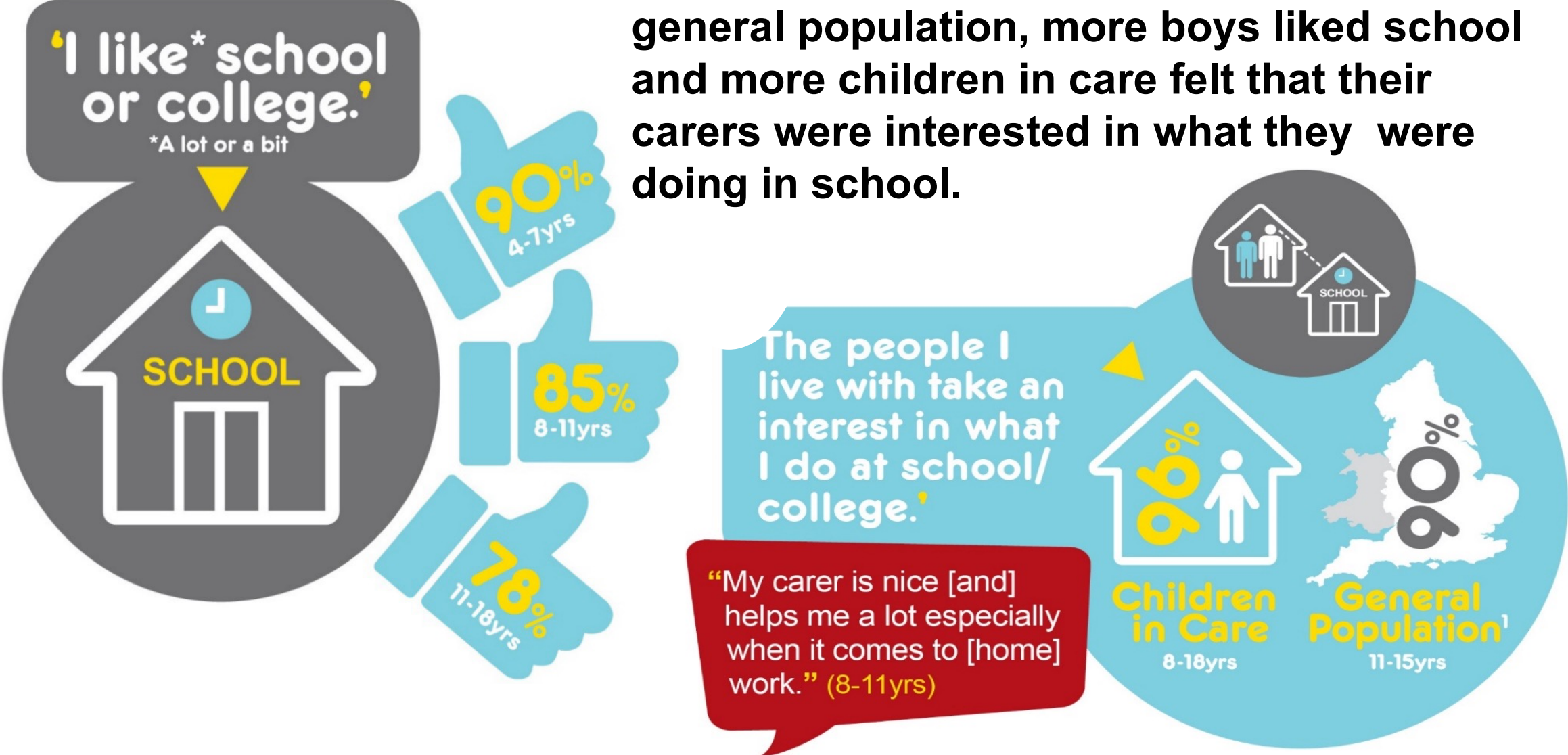
"I can trust my foster carers now and they support me in all the decisions I make. I feel that I have truly found a one in a million placement." (11-18yrs)

**The majority of children in care trusted their carers**



# School and support with learning

In comparison to young people in the general population, more boys liked school and more children in care felt that their carers were interested in what they were doing in school.



# Relationships – important people in your life

Contact with family is among the most common issues raised in the survey.



26%



19%

Mum and dad are a waste of space, useless. (11-18yrs)

It's sad because I only get to see my mum a little. I miss my dad too. (4-7 yrs)

I would like to see my family for longer than the 2 hours at a time. Ideally, I would like to see them for a whole day. (8-11yrs)

**TOO LITTLE**  
(8-18yrs)

"I feel like it's the best day ever when I see my mother, because I love seeing her. I'm very sad about not seeing my dad as I really miss him - he was very nice." (11-18yrs)

They don't let u go on the internet or go and see your friends (11-18yrs)



**One in ten**

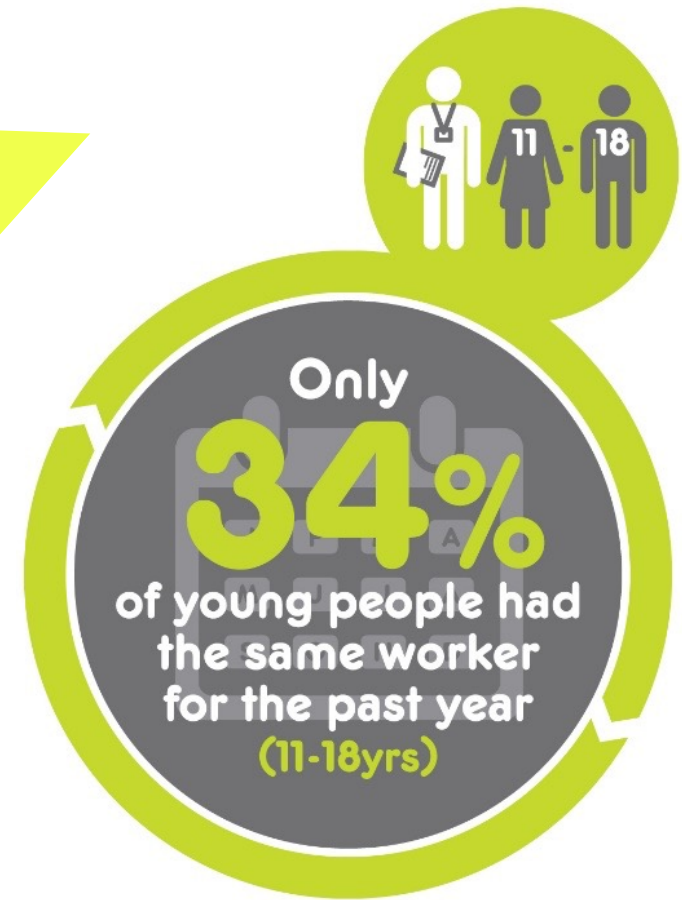
adolescents in care did not have a good friend.

Being friendless was associated with moves in care and not having access to a computer/tablet outside of school.

# Relationship with social workers



I think that social workers shouldn't move around as much because they just get to know your life story and you have to try to trust them but how can you trust them when you don't even know them or have hardly ever met them?  
(11-18yrs)

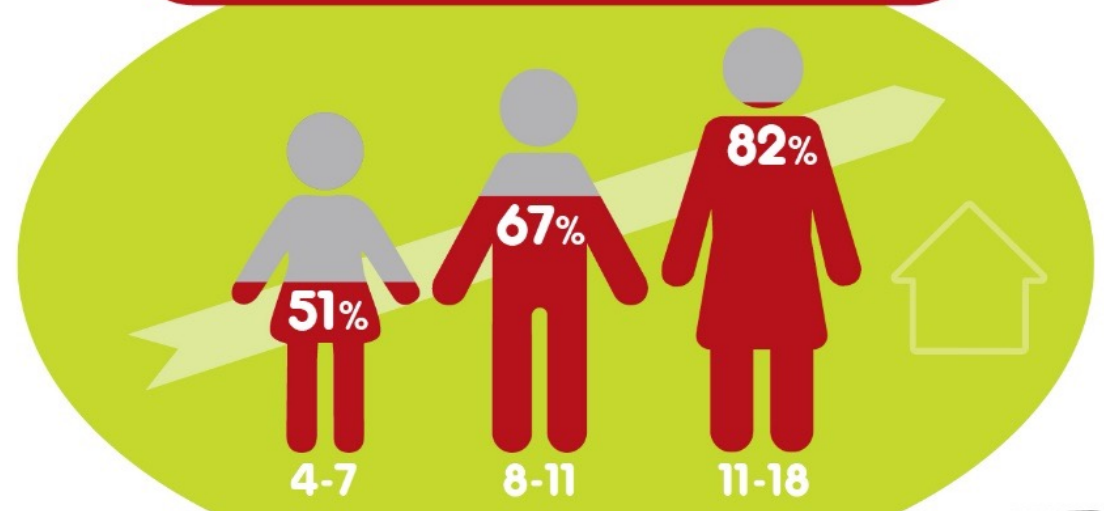


Lack of trust in social worker was associated with having had three or more social workers.

# Understanding reason for being in care

I would like someone to talk to about my feelings and tell me about my past. I would like to see a picture of my dad so I know what he looks like. I would like to see a picture of me as a baby. I have never seen a picture of me. I have a lot of questions that no-one answers.  
(11-18yrs)

Someone has fully explained why I am in care.



"I would like to know more about why I am in care and why I am not living with my mum." (4-7yrs)



4-7 year olds



**97%**

had moderate to high well-being

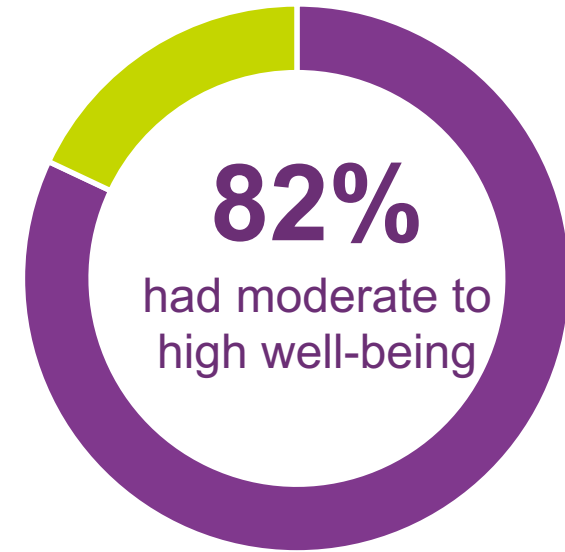
8-11 year olds



**96%**

had moderate to high well-being

11-18 year olds



**82%**

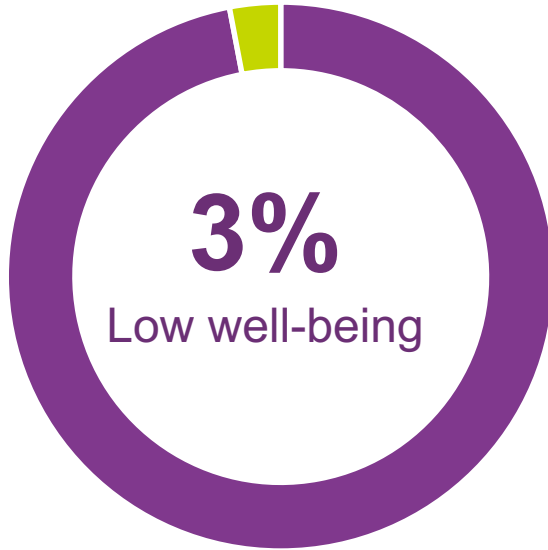
had moderate to high well-being

I would like to know for absolutely certain that I will always stay with mummy (foster carer). I love her and she loves me.  
(4-7yr old)

I wouldn't change anything except not having to eat avocados and courgettes.  
(8-11yr old)

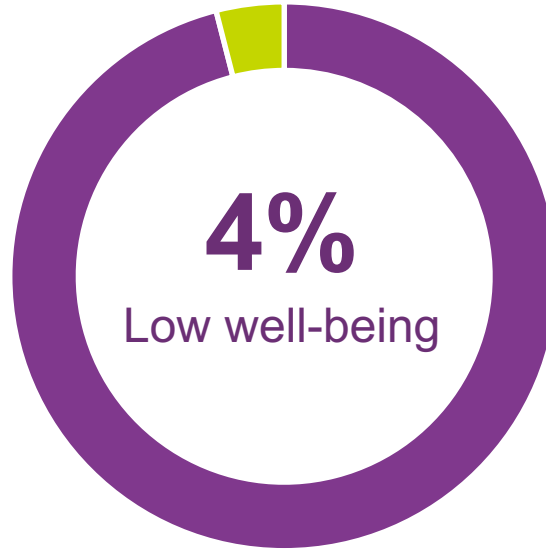
Being in care is the best thing that has happened to me. So many amazing opportunities have opened... like my attendance is significantly improved and I have so much support around me. I am very happy.  
(11-18yr old)

### 4-7 year olds



- Didn't understand why they were in care
- Did not know social worker.
- Felt unsettled, didn't trust carers or feel they noticed feelings
- Did not have good friend

### 8-11 year olds



- Felt unsafe or unsettled in their placements.
- No trusted adult
- Lacked trust in their social worker
- Did not feel included in decision-making
- Did not have a good friend.

### 11-18 year olds



- Unhappy with appearance
- Not given opportunities to be trusted
- Disliked bedrooms
- Felt unsafe in placements
- No trusted adult
- Did not feel included in decision-making
- Disliked school
- Afraid of going to school due to bullying
- Not taught life skills

**About 7% of teenagers in the general population have low well-being**

There was a steep decline in well-being when young people left care.

“The amount of support drops off massively from being in care and it’s overwhelming.”

(Care leaver)

We found that compared with children in care a higher percentage of care leavers felt unhappy, unsafe and unsettled where they lived.





Care leavers (16-24 yrs)



General population (16-24 yrs)

“Often we require more support and care than the general population because of our experiences though in reality we get much less... please fix that.”  
 (Care leaver)

Care leavers did worse than the general population on a range of measures.



For example, more care leavers had higher anxiety, lower life satisfaction, felt lonely and were less likely to have trusted supportive people in their lives



**'In last few weeks - I always/most of time feel lonely.'**



**1 in 5** Care leavers (19%)  
Comparison data - 10% of 16-24yrs report being lonely often/always.<sup>3</sup>

***It's mostly an alone feeling like I can't go anywhere or do anything because of the way I look and having nobody."***

***'more support I felt alone as soon as I left care'***

***'...I am really quite a lonely person who just wants a family and friends to enjoy small pleasures that don't cost money.'***

## Care leavers who reported that they had a disability or long-term health problem were particularly vulnerable.

They had lower well-being and were lonelier and less likely to have goals and plans for the future. Compared with other care leavers fewer felt safe and settled where they lived and more struggled financially.

Care leavers are more likely to report that they have a disability or long-term health problem



“My rights are often ignored because I am very disabled I [am] expected to fit into a system that I can’t fit into.”

(Care leaver)

Overall, although a majority of care leavers had moderate to high well-being 30% had low well-being.



Our analysis identified the factors associated with high and low well-being.

Care leavers with very high well-being

Felt treated better/same as other young people  
Felt proud and strong  
Felt safe and settled at home  
Did not feel lonely or afraid  
Experienced low levels of stress  
Bigger support networks, including partners  
Felt optimistic about their future  
Happy with how they looked

Struggled to cope financially  
Hardly ever/never felt proud, excited or strong  
Felt unsettled where they live  
Felt lonely or afraid or angry  
Experienced high levels of stress  
Lacked trusting and supportive relationships and good friends  
Pessimistic about the future  
Unhappy with how they looked

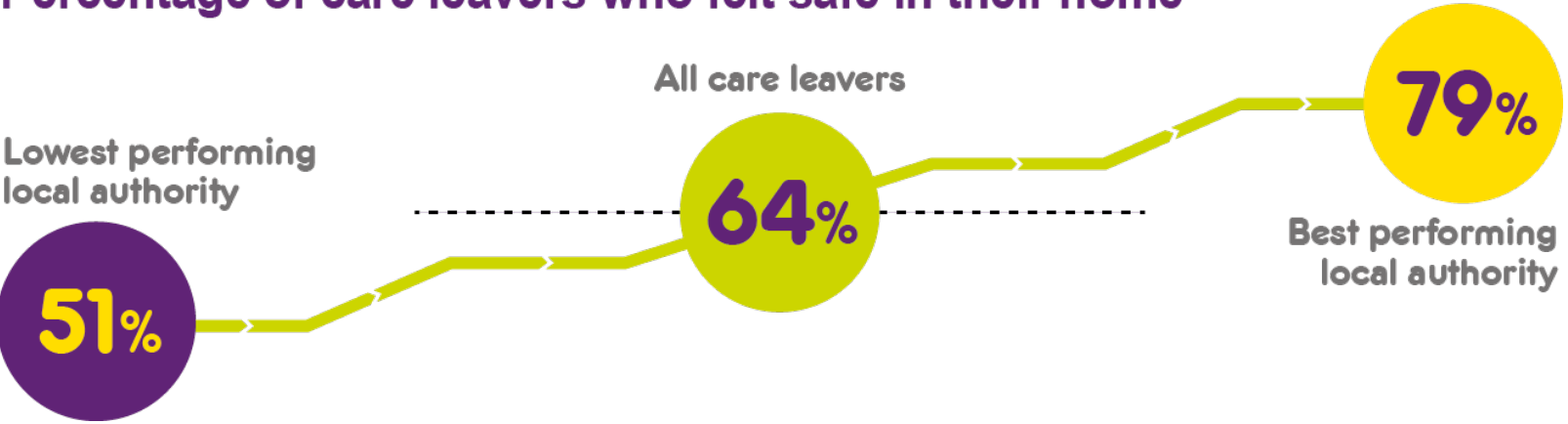
Care leavers with low well-being

The care system can get it right. We can learn from the positive experiences of those with high well-being. We also found that care leavers do better in some local authorities than in others.

### Percentage of care leavers with low well-being



### Percentage of care leavers who felt safe in their home



**Many young people were very positive about the support they received from their leaving care personal advisers (PAs).**

Care leavers reported higher levels of trust and more stability of workers compared with children in care.

**“She is amazing!  
Always goes  
above and beyond  
for you, always  
makes sure you’re  
okay and lets you  
know she’s always  
around.”**  
(Care leaver)

**Trust leaving care/social worker all or most of the time**



**Kept the same worker for 12 months**



# Shift in emphasis onto children and young people's priorities

*Are services focusing on what children and young people say is important?*

*Will children in care and care leavers feel that their lives improved as a result?*

# The power of a collective voice

*Social workers have been complaining that foster carers often don't invite kids home for tea .... it all gets dealt with individually ... There's always a reason why [inviting friends round] can't happen .... Bright Spots helped us to say, "You will be promoting, supporting, enabling friendships. This is what we expect." ...From a strategic perspective it allows you to go back to the problem ... This is what [children] say.*

*This is what we're doing.*

*(Principal SW)*

**Spotlight  
on  
practice**

## Isle of Wight Community allotment

**Why?** Access to nature + hobbies & activities can reduce stress & improve well-being; gardening beneficial for mental health.

### **What?**

- Can be used by all children in care & care leavers
- Rent free, materials & plants raised through community fundraising
- LA offers award in Horticulture
- Accessible: Raised beds for Wheelchairs.

**Impact:** *“It’s a place to go where you can socialise, you can learn. It’s a community allotment, so it offers young people the opportunity to meet other people and learn from them.”* (Leaving care team leader)



*“It’s a lovely space. It’s a wonderful place.”*  
**Leaving care team leader**

### **Next?**

- therapeutic mental health group
- ‘shed project’ learn to make things from wood and pallets



Coventry

## Building connection and trust with leaving care workers/PAs

**Why?** When developing *YLBC* survey care leavers stressed importance of leaving care workers being easy to get hold of and someone you can trust.



### What?

- Coventry invested in, and actively encourage, the use of social media: e.g., PAs use WhatsApp, Instagram; Leaving Care service Facebook page; care leaver apprentice develops social media links.
- LA Ethos - catch ups/interactions used as opportunities to check out how young people are feeling.
- PAs act like parent and catch up/spend time as opposed to conducted statutory visit
- PAs have purchase card to pay for things e.g., coffee/meal or gift to celebrate success.

**Impact:** Higher % of care leavers trusted PA 'all or most of the time' (86% vs 78%) and felt they could easily get in touch with their PAs (79% vs 71%) than in other LAs

**Spotlight  
on  
practice**

# Sheffield 'Reality Cheque'

**Why?** Bright Spots finding: Care leavers 3 x more likely to struggle financially than general population.

## What?

- Care leavers' 'Reality Cheque' project: corporate parents living on average weekly budget for CL
- Challenge pack & rules: £24 for 5 days & share progress through social media
- Encouraged to send in budget recipes → recipe book for care leavers

**Impact:** 90+ people took part (incl. DCS); local press attention; raised the profile of care leavers' money worries & new ideas about what more can be done;



**Spotlight  
on  
practice**

Isle of Wight

## Involving care leavers in commissioning new supported living accommodation

**Why?** Some care leavers report they feel unsafe or unsettled where they live & that it is not right for them.

### What?

- 1-year process getting care leavers involved in commissioning process & ensure fit for purpose
- Questions included in the tender application form for tender written by young people.
- information session for providers co-hosted by young people
- Young people helped to score applications

**Impact:** Demonstrates that it is possible to involve young people complex decision-making. For those young people involved they felt listened to and increased confidence.



*"It blew their mind that they were able to have an input into something at a strategic level."*

Participation worker

## Find out more

Care leaver report

<http://www.education.ox.ac.uk/new-report-highlights-wellbeing-inequality-among-care-leavers/>

Practice Bank of examples of Local Authority changes in response to their Bright Spots findings

<https://coramvoice.org.uk/for-professionals/bright-spots-2/how-to-make-life-good/>

# bright spots

Find out more about the Bright Spots programme and read more about what we do on our website

[www.coramvoice.org.uk/brightspots](http://www.coramvoice.org.uk/brightspots)

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