



Department
for Education

Enduring Relationships Strategy

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Contents

Introduction to Enduring Relationships	2
What are Enduring Relationships?	2
How will DfE support the system?	3
What We Are Asking of the Sector	3
Enduring relationships to support and build on wider CSC reforms	4
Why Enduring Relationships?	6
Delivering care with a focus on enduring relationships	8
1. Focussing practice on enduring relationships	11
2. Creating homes for enduring relationships	15
3. Supporting the move to living in a community	19
4. Supporting enduring relationships with learning, accountability and inspection	21

Introduction to Enduring Relationships

Our ambition is a children's social care system where every child grows up with enduring, trusted relationships that provide stability and belonging into adulthood, so they feel safe, loved, and able to thrive. This means that children's social care should nurture connection with families, friends and other trusted and valued adults, both those that they hold when entering care and new ones that they encounter within care.

Every young person needs relationships like these to form a strong sense of identity, and to reach adulthood with confidence. However, too many children in care and care experienced people do not have high quality relationships because it is not the central focus of the care system. Indeed, despite the best efforts of practitioners, the care system too often breaks rather than makes these critical relationships.

This paper explains why enduring relationships matter; how we are going to change the care and leaving care systems to prioritise them; and how we will work with the sector to ensure they become the golden thread that runs through every child's life.

What are Enduring Relationships?

Enduring relationships are the important, consistent and lasting relationships in a child's life, which provide emotional security and warmth, responsiveness, attunement, dependability and shared positive experiences.

When children have at least one relationship with these elements, they have improved educational and health outcomes (both physical and mental), reduced likelihood of harm, increased resilience¹ – both personal and economic, improving the chances of reunification with their family and of that reunification sticking¹. Most importantly, these relationships reduce loneliness and improve life satisfaction². For vulnerable children, having a caring adult nearly halves the prevalence of suicide considerations³ and can be enough to buffer the effects of significant childhood adversity⁴.

The evidence is clear, but this makes intuitive sense too: we all need people in our life who love us and who we love.

¹ Risk and Protective Factors of Foster Care Reentry: An Examination of the Literature: Journal of Public Child Welfare: Vol 11 , No 4-5 - Get Access:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15548732.2017.1357668>

² From Surviving to Thriving: The seven drivers of well-being for children in care and care leavers - Coram Voice: <https://coramvoice.org.uk/resource-library/from-surviving-to-thriving-the-seven-drivers-of-well-being-for-children-in-care-and-care-leavers/>

³ Supportive Relationships Mitigate the Effect of Cumulative Exposure to Adverse Childhood Experiences on Depression, Anxiety, Stress, and Suicide Considerations—The Arizona Youth Risk Behavior Survey: <https://www.mdpi.com/2227-9067/11/2/161>

⁴ Supportive Relationships with Trusted Adults for Children and Young People Who Have Experienced Adversities: Implications for Social Work Service Provision | The British Journal of Social Work | Oxford Academic: <https://academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/53/6/3129/7091809>

There is no single model of an enduring relationship, but evidence shows the best outcomes come from prioritising those already in a child's life. These relationships are defined by the child and may include family, friends, neighbours, youth workers, teachers, or a friend's parent.

How will DfE support the system?

Enduring Relationships will align our national reforms of care to focus practice on enduring relationships by:

- creating homes for enduring relationships
- supporting the transition to early adulthood
- ensuring that inspection and accountability guide the system towards prioritising enduring relationships

We will:

- continue to lead and support the implementation of children's social care reform as set out in the Children's Social Care Implementation Plan and aligned with the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act.
- ensure all relevant DfE programmes, funding and guidance are aligned to support and strengthen enduring relationships
- implement a measure of enduring relationships which sets clear expectations and direction as well as helping to improve services and hold them to account
- set expectations and direction for services working with children who are, will be or have been in the care of the state.
- work with the sector to drive change.

What We Are Asking of the Sector

We recognise that many social workers, carers and professionals work extremely hard with children and young people to build and sustain trusted relationships. We want this to become the focus of the system. We ask everyone working with care experienced young people to:

- engage in the conversation we are starting on what works and what more we can do to embed enduring relationships

- consider the evidence set out in this paper and think about what more you and the services you deliver can do to support enduring relationships
- act now – there is a wealth of knowledge and good practice to build on and no need to wait before making changes

Enduring relationships to support and build on wider CSC reforms

The state finds it hard to create the conditions to ensure that all children leave care with enduring relationships, but up until now it hasn't been the core focus of the care and leaving care systems. This is difficult and social workers are too often forced to make life changing decisions for children in the context of managing immediate risks, within constraints such as a shortage of foster homes. This means that urgent needs are prioritised over the enduring relationships children need. This is not good enough and we want to work together with the sector to change it.

Creating a focus on Enduring Relationships is about a change in practice and decision making and we are asking all professionals to consider what they can do to make this change a reality. The experience of children in care is complex and not always in the power of an individual practitioner to fix so we must also change the organisational conditions.

This will mean:

- supporting more children to live safely with their parents and family networks so that resources can be better focused
- ensuring there are sufficient options of foster and residential homes for social workers to find the right home for a child
- making sure that relationships are the focus.

We are delivering the biggest reform to CSC in a generation through the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026 which will lay the foundations for enduring relationships – including:

- legislating for Kinship Care, Family Group Decision Making and Staying Close
- placing corporate parenting duties on all central government departments and other public bodies (including schools).

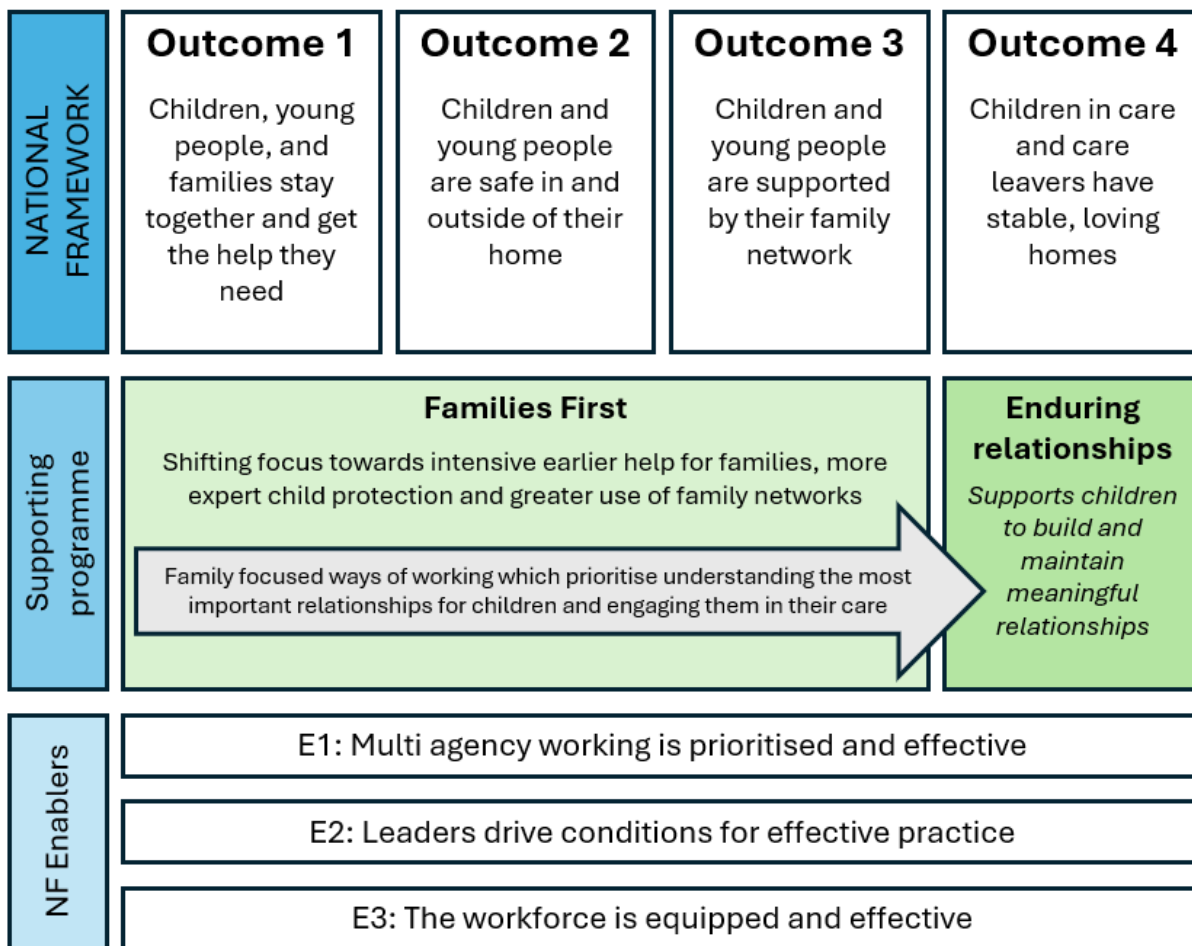
We have backed this up with a £2.4bn investment to support local areas to implement Family Help and multi-agency child protection reforms, and enhance support for Family Networks, through the Families First Partnership Programme.

These reforms focus on keeping more children safely with their parents and in their wider family networks.

Making enduring relationships the guiding principle of children's social care will take the system further, helping local authorities and practitioners to build coherent services, which help children grow into fulfilled and connected adults. Children are safe when they have adults who they trust who look out for and care about them. This is why enduring relationships reinforce safety and enable care-experienced children to achieve and thrive. This is why we are making them the top priority for the care and leaving care system in England.

Our approach must be based on a child's view of who matters to them and professional judgement on what is safe and appropriate in individual circumstances. But judgements and decisions must be considered, planned and acted upon with the knowledge that the foundation of affection, love and connection with important people is an essential pre-requisite. This focus will mean re-wiring how we make decisions – bringing in the child's network to the decision-making process, taking a child's view on stability into account and ensuring that professionals really ask how this can be done safely. It must be a continuum of activity, nurtured at each step, and not treated as an isolated intervention.

We are investing significantly and making a range of changes to children's services so we can collectively achieve the four outcomes set out in the Children's Social Care National Framework. Through the Families First Partnership Programme we want to make sure that children, young people and their families stay together, and they get the help they need and ensure that children are safe inside and outside of their homes. These reforms will change the system by reducing the numbers of children coming into care, reforming the care market to provide the right homes for children and drive out excessive profit making. Enduring relationships will build on this reform to ensure children who are not able to safely stay with their families get the love and support they deserve and need to achieve and thrive. The National Framework Enablers support the delivery of these goals.



Building and sustaining loving relationships around care-experienced young people is this Government’s overarching policy goal and must become the key focus of services working with children who are, will be or have been in the care of the state. All professionals working in these services should press ahead today. We will work with the sector to understand and share best practice in designing services which hold enduring relationships as the golden thread.

Why Enduring Relationships?

At its best care provides children with the home and the support to maintain the relationships they need to thrive. They have good childhoods, safely maintain relationships with family, have a stable and loving home and go on to live productive and fulfilling lives. Far too often, care is achieving the reverse: breaking rather than making lifelong loving relationships despite the efforts and care of many professionals working with them. Enduring Relationships is designed to change this.

Over 81,000 children were looked after on 31 March 2025⁵. In 2024, 10% of children in care moved home three or more times in one year. In 2025, 22% lived more than 20 miles

⁵ Release home - Children looked after in England including adoptions - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2025>

away from their home community. For the cohort of children leaving school in 2010/11, in the 8 years that followed, care-experienced people were three times more likely to claim out-of-work benefits, four times less likely to attend Higher Education, less likely to be employed compared to all individuals and when they were employed they earned less money⁶.

We know that children in care are some of the most vulnerable children in society. 28% of child serious incidents included serious harm or death of looked after children⁷; 11% of children in care were reported missing in 2025 – most of these from children’s homes (35%) or supported accommodation (31%)⁸; and the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse found that in 2018, child sexual exploitation was identified in 16% of all assessments for children in care⁹. Children in care and care leavers are between four and five times more likely to attempt suicide in adulthood¹⁰ and the overall death rate for care leavers aged 16 to 24 is over three times higher than for the rest of the population¹¹.

Figure 2: Levels of loneliness for care leavers and the general population

	Care leaver (16 to 24)	General population (16 to 24)
Lonely always/often	22%	10%
Do not have a <u>really good</u> friend	15%	5%
Do not have someone they trust	14%	4%
Do not have someone who will be there for them	14%	4%

12

⁶ Post-16 educational and employment outcomes of children in need: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6286267fe90e071f5f7e1b4a/Post-16_educational_and_employment_outcomes_of_children_in_need.pdf

⁷ Release home - Serious incident notifications - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/serious-incident-notifications/2025>

⁸ Release home - Children looked after in England including adoptions - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2025#section-children-missing-or-away-from-placement-without-authorisation>

⁹ D.2: Children in care | IICSA Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse: <https://www.iicsa.org.uk/reports-recommendations/publications/investigation/cs-organised-networks/part-d-meeting-needs-particular-groups-sexually-exploited-children/d2-children-care.html>

¹⁰ Report of the Children and Young People’s Health Outcomes Forum - Mental Health Sub-Group: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/216853/CYP-Mental-Health.pdf

¹¹ Release home - Serious incident notifications - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/serious-incident-notifications/2025>

¹² Coram Voice - Care leavers' views on their well-being report: <https://coramvoice.org.uk/resource-library/what-makes-life-good-care-leavers-views-on-their-well-being/>

Care leavers report high levels of loneliness and a lack of strong connections, and this has a real impact on their lives¹³. Severe loneliness has a financial cost estimated at £9,900 per year for each afflicted person¹⁴. It is also devastating to wellbeing, and care leavers are over three times more likely to have low wellbeing if they are lonely¹⁵. Looking at the whole population, the effect of loneliness on mortality is thought to be on a par with other public health priorities like obesity or smoking¹⁶. Clare Chamberlain and Ashley John-Baptiste are leading the Review of Care Leaver Deaths, and we have asked them to look at whether loneliness from the constant failing of relationships is a leading cause of early death for care-experienced adults.

Enduring Relationships foster the resilience and competence required for vulnerable children to transition successfully into adulthood and to sustain wellbeing. There is no one ideal form of relationship, but evidence suggests prioritising existing relationships over new ones¹⁷¹⁸. These relationships are always defined by the child. They may include family but also friends, best friends' parents, neighbours, youth workers or teachers. There must always be a focus on safely maintaining relationships with a child's birth family (unless that would be detrimental to the child), and particularly contact with brothers and sisters, which we know from children and young people are often among the most important relationships¹⁹. 24% of children will return home from care which is hugely significant for these children²⁰. But not all children can or should return home and the system should also consider the child's wider network and how new relationships can be fostered. The focus of services supporting children in care must be to understand and support an individual child's relationships and relational goals.

Delivering care with a focus on enduring relationships

The drive towards putting enduring relationships at the heart of the care system is about working towards permanence as defined by the child. Children talked to the 2013 Care Enquiry about permanence meaning 'security, stability, love and a strong sense of identity

¹³ From Surviving to Thriving: The seven drivers of well-being for children in care and care leavers - Coram Voice: <https://coramvoice.org.uk/resource-library/what-makes-life-good-care-leavers-views-on-their-well-being/>

¹⁴ Loneliness monetisation report DCMS 2020: <https://coramvoice.org.uk/resource-library/from-surviving-to-thriving-the-seven-drivers-of-well-being-for-children-in-care-and-care-leavers/>

¹⁵ From Surviving to Thriving: The seven drivers of well-being for children in care and care leavers - Coram Voice:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/963077/Loneliness_monetisation_report_V2.pdf

¹⁶ Health impact | Campaign to End Loneliness: <https://coramvoice.org.uk/resource-library/from-surviving-to-thriving-the-seven-drivers-of-well-being-for-children-in-care-and-care-leavers/>

¹⁷ Natural Mentors, Mental Health, and Risk Behaviors: A Longitudinal Analysis of African American Adolescents Transitioning into Adulthood - PMC: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC2922467/>

¹⁸ Gibbons, Ben - Thesis: <https://eprints.staffs.ac.uk/9587/1/Gibbons%2C%20Ben%20-%20Thesis.pdf>

¹⁹ cc-siblings-in-care.pdf: <https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2023/01/cc-siblings-in-care.pdf>

²⁰ Release home - Children looked after in England including adoptions - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2025>

and belonging'²¹. The Independent Review of Children's Social Care (2022) recommended a relentless focus on family networks, reunification or other forms of permanence that promote lifelong relationships. This is what we must provide all children in the care of the state so that they can achieve and thrive. Delivering it will require leaders in local authorities and practitioners, along with wider partners such as schools and health professionals to consider how every interaction a child has can promote or damage relationships.

This is a call to arms for all practitioners and leaders working with children in and leaving care to consider how they can shape their work to ensure that all children leave care with a network of enduring relationships. There is much that can be done today, where opportunities will stand out to local authorities and professionals and we shouldn't delay changes that will improve services. We also want you to join us on our journey to understand how services can be designed and delivered.

FFP drives this focus on Family help, multi-agency child protection and Family Network support, focusing practice on doing all that can be done to help families stay together safely including:

- providing intensive and skilled help to families at the right point
- offering Family Group Decision Making to unlock the potential of family networks
- bringing safeguarding partners together to make more confident child protection decisions
- considering kinship care where children might be able to stay within the wider family network
- providing support to birth parents to make reunification possible following periods in care

Throughout this journey practitioners will be working with children to understand and support their relationships.

The National Framework for children's social care sets the expectation for the system including helping children nurture lifelong, loving relationships with family and friends (including brothers and sisters, birth parents and former carers) and using their care, knowledge and expertise to address concerns, enhance relationships and improve decision making. This is the golden thread which links the Families First Partnership Programme and Enduring Relationships. From a child's perspective this must be seamless – supporting them through this major transition in their lives.

²¹ Making not Breaking report cover:

<https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/Care%20Inquiry%20-%20Full%20Report%20April%202013.pdf>

Enduring Relationships will align our national reforms of care to:

1. **Focus practice on enduring relationships** by ensuring that all work in the system is aligned with the focus on enduring relationships
2. **Create homes for enduring** relationships by ensuring that there is enough of a varied range of homes in the right places to meet the needs of children
3. **Support the transition to early adulthood** by making sure that children are ready and supported to transition to interdependent living when they leave care, held by those important relationships
4. **Ensure that inspection and accountability guide the system towards prioritising enduring relationships**

This focus on enduring relationships is not at the expense of safety, health or education – enduring relationships is a pre-requisite for getting them right.

We want to understand how the focus on enduring relationships can help us drive the practice change we need to see and we will look at ways of sharing best practice.

We know that there are local authorities which are already demonstrating strong practice, approach and innovation in their care and leaving care services. We are talking to some of them about working with us and their partners to design services to promote enduring relationships and showcase the very best practice including engagement with experts and with children. We will start this work with our learning partners in July, with the aim of providing an interim update in autumn and a guide setting out best practice in service design in Spring 2027.

We know that many local authorities already work in ways that fit well with this approach. We look forward to learning from you as you adjust to prioritise enduring relationships for the children you care for.

We want to hear from you about how we can make the approach work including:

- examples of good practice
- ways of working which build the right environment for professionals
- local and national processes
- rules or guidelines which create unnecessary blockages

We will provide more details on how to submit examples and join the conversation in July 2026.

1. Focussing practice on enduring relationships

The journey into care

Getting this right means really understanding what it means for the child at each stage of their journey into and through the care system. It means:

- identifying the people who care about them and including them in decision making
- wrapping support around the child to find ways to safely maintain contact
- not disrupting school, friendships or health provision
- understanding and doing the work that makes reunification possible

This isn't about doing more. It's about working differently and designing services to enable practitioners to focus on relationships.

In reality, when children enter care, they experience significant instability. On average a child in care will experience three placements, but those who enter residential care will on average experience more than six placements. Children who enter care after the age of 11 experience significantly more instability than those who enter before 11. These children have often already experienced instability at school, such as fixed term exclusions. Of the children who turned 19 in 2019/20 and who had lived in care at some point in their childhood, 61% have been recorded as missing from care at some point between the ages of 14 and 17 and 24% had at least one conviction while in care²².

Too often we see children placed in the wrong homes to begin with, often because we haven't started from an understanding of who already knows and cares about the child or their wider needs haven't been fully understood. This is compounded by a shortage of options for homes and so the wrong matches are often made. We see relationships being lost because these have not been prioritised through family network engagement, such as Family Group Decision Making, before a child is taken into care; as a result of children's homes being too far from their communities; because they have been damaged through family justice proceedings; or because there is not enough opportunity or support to maintain them. The Children's Commissioner estimated that more than one in three children in care have been separated from their brothers and sisters by the care system with too little recognition of the impact this has²³.

²² Understanding Residential Care for Children in Care in England Analysis of Administrative Data: https://foundations.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/WWCSC_residential_care_report_FINAL_accessible-v2-Feb-2024.pdf

²³ Children's Commissioner for England publishes report on the separation of children in care and their brothers and sisters: <https://www.celcis.org/news/news-pages/childrens-commissioner-england-publishes-report-separation-children-care-and-their-brothers-and-sisters>

Our approach to ensuring there are enough of the right homes for children is set out in the next section of this paper. At its heart though, we need a change of mindset and of practice to prioritise relationships. We will bring our learning partner local authorities together to look at the child's journey from family help and into care to ask how we can drive more effective care planning, looking for best practice and to understand what is preventing this from happening nationally. This will include looking at the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations and the Care Standards to prioritise enduring relationships.

We have recently published the *Early career standards – Professional standards for child and family social workers*²⁴ which places relationships at the heart of social work practice standards and must be embedded by April 2027.

These standards seek to ensure that care plans are co-created through collaborative relationships with children, families and their wider networks – not just those relationships with professional services. Social workers should prioritise family and community connections when considering alternative or complementary care whenever it is in the best interests of the child. The standards are explicit that relationships underpin almost every aspect of intervention – that they are the mechanism through which change occurs and essential to permanence and identity. They acknowledge that relationships are complex, sometimes unsafe, and must be handled with skill rather than idealised – which is why Enduring Relationships need to be at the heart of all practice and reforms.

We are already drafting changes to the Fostering Minimum Standards so that trusted relationships become the main test as to whether the system is working for children. This means both protecting children's trusted relationships so they can integrate back into their family well if they are reunified and building new, lifelong loving relationships where needed – which should be maintained even when children are reunified. Even where children come into foster care for the long term, their links to safe, trusted adults they feel secure with, such as an aunt, a teacher, and of course their foster parent, should never disappear.

To empower carers, we will make it explicit in our revised guidance and standards that foster carers can make day-to-day decisions about the children in their care to ensure they feel autonomy and agency in decisions for children in their care. New standards will also reduce burdens for foster carers and ensure processes do not stand in the way of forming relationships. We will review the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer and embed a focus on whether care is strengthening enduring relationships and if it's not, challenging the local authority to address this. We will ensure the system is accountable for this.

²⁴https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/698cb116bd090be481c287b5/Early_career_standards_for_child_and_family_social_workers_Apr_2027.pdf

Maintaining family relationships

While all relationships should be considered through care planning, relationships with brothers and sisters should have a particular focus. These represent shared experiences and real understanding of significant periods in a child's life. Children talk about siblings related by birth, but also those such as foster siblings or siblings in blended families who have become just as close²⁵.

Services should do everything possible to keep siblings together through care or maintain relationships where that is not possible. Through the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026, we are strengthening requirements placed on local authorities to allow reasonable contact between children in care and their brothers and sisters, recognising that most siblings would expect this to be regular and frequent. The new regulations will come into force in autumn 2026. To support local authorities in delivering on this strengthened duty we have also committed to identifying and sharing best practice on facilitating family time for siblings. Local authorities and practitioners should consider the child's views on who their brothers and sisters are and what they mean to them.

Providing advocacy and support

Throughout their lives in care, advocacy is the tool which allows children to speak out for themselves and enables them to articulate which relationships matter most to them and why, when professionals are making decisions about their lives. An advocate should be provided whenever a looked after child, child in need or care leaver wants support to express their views, wishes and feelings. Evidence from the Children's Commissioner's report *Advocacy for Children* shows that provision of advocacy services by local authorities is inconsistent²⁶. Findings show that the support of an advocate can help children understand their legal entitlements, navigate the care system and access services. Advocacy services should be proactively offered and promoted at regular points through the child's life, for example during review meetings, so that advocates can contact them unless they specifically decline this service. DfE will make this absolutely clear in the statutory guidance *Effective Advocacy for Looked-After Children, Children in Need and Care Leavers* to be published soon. We will also launch a pilot to test the use of opt-out advocacy in residential settings later in 2026.

One of the most effective ways of providing trusted adult relationship for children and young people who are care-experienced is through mentoring and befriending interventions. The *Foundations Practice Guide* provides the strong evidence base for these programmes and sets out what works for programme design and implementation.

²⁵ cc-siblings-in-care.pdf: <https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2023/01/cc-siblings-in-care.pdf>

²⁶ Advocacy for children | Children's Commissioner for England: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/advocacy-for-children/>

Family justice

At 31 March 2025, 19% of children in care were looked after under a Section 20 voluntary arrangements²⁷. For other children the transition into care is guided by the Family Justice system. Care proceedings are too often adversarial by their nature and have the potential to undo good work with the family which has been undertaken as children approach care (also known as pre-proceedings work). At their worst they can destroy relationships and inhibit work to sustain relationships between the child and the family network, whether children enter care or not. At their best, they represent a relentless pursuit of exhausting every option to keep a child within their family network – where the judiciary, local authority, Cafcass and other professionals work to the shared objective of securing the best possible outcome for a child and their family.

We will publish a cross-government family justice strategy this in Summer 2026, which will set out our ambitions to to:

- improve pre-proceedings practice before court
- embed problem-solving approaches throughout the family justice system
- drive more transparency in data on children and families involved in proceedings and their outcomes

At the heart of this will be fostering a system which harnesses family networks to provide enduring relationships for children whether they enter care or not.

Reunification

The system will always ask questions about whether reunification is right and possible and how other relationships can be built and maintained – including the learning from the NSPCC’s Home Again research into reunification practice. Data on reunification shows significant geographical variation in how often it happens.

There is more to do to drive the right approach and understand best practice – including drawing on Family Network Support Packages – to provide appropriate funding to enable successful reunification. The forthcoming Reunification Practice Guide from Foundations – What Works Centre for Children and Families, will set out what is known from high quality evidence about effective reunification practices and will guide plans to strengthen work locally through key principles and recommendations for practice.

Through the Families First Partnership Programme, we are taking vital steps to promote sustainable reunification through Family Help, Family Group Decision Making and the use of Family Network Support Packages. Where reunification is in the best interests of the

²⁷ Statistics: England | CoramBAAF: <https://corambaaf.org.uk/resources/statistics/statistics-england>
<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2025>

child, a holistic approach that recognises the needs and responsibilities of everyone in the family, including birth parents, is necessary. As well as Family Group Decision Making being seen as one of the pathways for reunification, this arrangement can also be supported through a Family Network Support Package. These offer flexible, financial and practical help to unlock support from family networks where funding would otherwise be a barrier. Family Network Support Packages can enable family networks to step in and provide support to keep a child within the network, including promoting reunification where this is in the child's best interests. The type of support will vary but should be bespoke to the needs of the individual child and family.

2. Creating homes for enduring relationships

Where a child is in the care of the state, they should be provided with a home that meets their needs including their need for love and support. If children experience the new home as disempowering, transactional, guarded or hostile then we have not done well enough. Homes should provide a family-based environment or be a form of purposeful residential care which provides a stable, therapeutic environment to create a route back to a family-based environment. A child's current enduring relationships might not be with a primary care giver, and decisions need to be made carefully to ensure children can stay close to people they know and love, and to their communities.

Ensuring we have enough of the right homes

The state invests significantly in the care system. The experiences and outcomes of children in care show that this money is not being used effectively, and that local authorities are facing rising costs to place children in care. Additionally, we know that there are some providers who are prioritising profits instead of helping children to live fulfilling, safe lives based on a network of enduring relationships.

At its worst, this is shown by the high numbers of unregistered and out of area placements. Unregistered, unlawful placements provide no regulatory assurance about children's safety, staff or environment, and children often receive little purposeful support.

Out of area placements can also disrupt children's connections with their community and loved ones. These issues are symptoms of not having enough of the right types of homes – loving homes in family settings and purposeful residential homes in the right locations. We are taking a range of actions to address this. We have set out clear reforms to create 10,000 more foster placements by the end of this parliament, and in partnership with local authorities and Ofsted, we will build homes in the right areas of the country including from Winter 2026, amending secondary legislation to increase controls on where children's homes can be opened. Whilst we expect the residential care market to reduce as we prioritise family-based settings for children in care, we are improving the sufficiency of high-quality registered placements, with £560 million of capital funding to reform the

children's social care system, support refurbishment and expand children's homes where they are needed most.

Managing homes

Regional Care Cooperatives (RCCs) are foundational in enabling groups of local authorities, along with key partners such as Integrated Care Boards, to build and manage flexible provision – and to create the range of homes necessary to meet the needs of the children in their care. We will expand RCCs based on learning from the Greater Manchester and South East pathfinders. We have launched an expression of interest backed by over £10 million to support up to 6 more RCCs.

RCCs will harness the collective buying power of individual local authorities and allow them to gain economies of scale, transforming the approach local areas take to commissioning and providing homes for children in care. They will be responsible for:

- analysing future accommodation needs for looked after children across the region
- publishing sufficiency strategies
- recruiting and supporting foster carers
- investing in and running models of care

The vision is for every local authority to be part of an RCC, operating at scale to deliver homes for children in care and delivering what matters most: children thriving in safe, supportive environments.

There must always be sufficient homes for the children that need them and we published our approach to managing provision of children's homes in Keeping Children Safe, Helping Families Thrive including taking forward a new Financial Oversight Scheme across the children's social care placements market as set out in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026. This scheme, modelled on a similar scheme in adult social care, will increase financial and corporate transparency among the most "difficult to replace" children's social care providers. The scheme will allow us to make a more accurate, real-time assessment of financial risk, and provide advance warning to local authorities where there is a real possibility that risk to financial sustainability could lead a provider to cease operating. This will help us guard against sudden market exit and ensure local authorities can take swift action and minimise disruption to children.

Homes for 10,000 more children in fostering

Fostering is often the best way to create a home for a child in care. We have published Renewing Fostering - our action plan for addressing the challenges in the current fostering system and aligning it to focus on enduring relationships. The plan sets out how we will reverse the decline in foster carers by bringing more people in and by keeping the carers

we already have – and importantly, ensuring that enduring relationships are a central focus. By increasing the number of foster carers, we can reduce the number of children in residential homes when they don't need to be there. This is better for those children and saves money to spend on other aspects of the system. We will create 10,000 more places by the end of this parliament. It builds on previous investment of £36 million between 2023 and 2025 which included our work to set up regional recruitment hubs and funding for foster carer support. We will invest a further £88 million including up to £25 million of capital spend on our Room Makers programme, over the next two financial years. The plan focuses on five priority areas:

1. National scale action to expand fostering
2. Enhanced regional collaboration
3. Innovation that improves outcomes for children
4. Stronger support around fostering families
5. A single rulebook that puts relationships first.

Case Study: supporting a family to help younger children

A family who had provided supported lodgings for several care leavers identified that they would like to support younger children through a mainstream fostering route.

To prevent the young people already within the family being disrupted, the sufficiency board approved funding to adapt the downstairs of the family home, creating an additional space and a family room suitable to the needs of a larger family.

Due to a lack of foster homes, a child was living in residential care a distance from their family. The additional space in the family home allowed a match to be made and for the child to live in a family home closer to their family and local networks.

This arrangement allowed the child to maintain the important relationships in her life while the young people being supported into independence were not disrupted and didn't face a leaving care 'cliff edge' at 18.

Residential children's homes

While we want children to be placed in a family setting wherever possible, we recognise that this is not always possible and there will always be a need for residential care which provides specialist, high quality and therapeutic support for children, and a route to a family setting.

We have commissioned an expert-led review to set the vision of a smaller, more purposeful residential sector. It will define the knowledge, skills, behaviours, development

and training the workforce needs to effectively support children who have experienced significant challenges or instability within family-based settings, while shifting the care system to prioritise building enduring relationships.

This review will lay the foundations of our future work to support the residential care system and workforce by:

- recommending improvements to qualifications, continuing professional development, career pathways, practice models and leadership
- introducing career standards to shape the development of qualifications and training to improve workforce practice.

Deprivation of Liberty and children with complex needs

Too many children are being deprived of their liberty because of our shared failure to meet their needs and keep them safe within their communities. Each child in these complex situations can cost local authorities over £1 million and their outcomes are some of the poorest²⁸. DfE-funded research²⁹ reported that children and young people with complex needs do not appear overnight. While many enter care late, they are known to children's services for many years and often experience repeat referrals and/or periods of coming into and out of care. Better identification and provision of sustained support to children and their families in early adolescence may prevent issues escalating and the Families First Partnership Programme will help with this.

Once in care, the disruption and instability from frequent and often unsafe placements which break down can re-traumatise children and young people and exacerbate existing mental health and behavioural issues. The research identified the core components of 3 promising approaches for these children. This included an emphasis on keeping children near local schools and other services with the aim that engagement with local services can be sustained when transitioning out of care or into a new, less restrictive placement.

Building on promising approaches in areas such as Newcastle and Gateshead, Wakefield and West Sussex, the Home Again programme will test new multi-disciplinary ways of understanding and supporting children in complex situations. By strengthening the support available to carers and families, and improving consistency and decision making across services, the pilots aim to reduce the likelihood that restrictions on a child's liberty become necessary. This will support more children to remain in family-based settings where that is

²⁸ Illegal Children's Homes: <https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2024/12/cco-illegal-childrens-homes.pdf>

²⁹ Improving the outcomes of looked after children and young people in complex situations with multiple needs, at risk or subject to a Deprivation of Liberty: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68d10ccbe65dc716bfb1dbac/Improving_the_outcomes_of_looked_after_children_and_young_people_in_complex_situations_with_multiple_needs_at_risk_or_subject_to_a_deprivation_of_liberty_pdf.pdf

safe and appropriate, while ensuring that those who need residential care experience stable, purposeful placements.

3. Supporting the move to living in a community

As set out previously, care leavers are significantly more likely to feel lonely, more likely to be homeless and more likely to attempt suicide than other members of the community³⁰. The odds of having low wellbeing were three times higher if they were lonely³¹. We need to move to a focus on supporting care leavers to live as part of their community, not just living independently. Rather than a sole focus on skills, we should be focused on creating the tribe that young people need to mature emotionally and develop capacities and stability to move towards greater independence.

All the parts of Enduring Relationships will provide the foundations for interdependent living, but further work will also be needed to find and re-build relationships that have been lost and to provide needs-based support out of care and into the community.

A national sprint to roll out Family Finding

Maintaining and building links to important relationships will be the overarching goal of children's social care, but relationships are always at risk and can be lost. There will also be children today who have not had the benefit of this aligned practice. All children in care and care leavers must be supported to find and re-build lost relationships. Family Finding programmes such as Lifelong Links³² have a promising evidence base for effectively re-building the most important relationships in a child's life.

Currently almost 2,000 children and young people are recorded as benefiting from Family Finding across 24 projects. Forthcoming research findings show a statistically significant increase in the number of identified meaningful connections – on average participants gained 2.2 additional connections with people important in their lives. Over a third reconnected with their immediate family, including stepfamily (35%) and over a third had reconnected with professionals, including teachers and social workers (35%). Qualitative findings reinforce that these connections support identity, reduce isolation, and create the foundations for long-term stability³³. Every child in care and care leaver must have access to these services and we will soon launch a national sprint to support roll out in every local authority – further building the evidence base on effective practice as we do so - and

³⁰ Report of the Children and Young People's Health Outcomes Forum - Mental Health Sub-Group: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/216853/CYP-Mental-Health.pdf

³¹ From Surviving to Thriving: The seven drivers of well-being for children in care and care leavers - Coram Voice: <https://coramvoice.org.uk/resource-library/from-surviving-to-thriving-the-seven-drivers-of-well-being-for-children-in-care-and-care-leavers/>

³² Lifelong Links is an approach that was designed by Family Rights Group: <https://frg.org.uk/lifelong-links>

³³ Evaluation of the Family Finding and Befriending and Mentoring programme: year 1 early findings report: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68d3fe058c739d679fb1dd4c/Family-finding-and-befriending-and-mentoring-programme-year-1-early-findings.pdf>

giving local authorities the expert support they need embed programmes in their work with children in care and care leavers.

Case Study: using Lifelong Links to create a family

Hannah was accommodated under Section 20 in January 2020 when she was nearly 16 years old. Hannah approached Lifelong Links to try and regain a relationship with her birth mother. She had tried herself in the past without success and hoped Lifelong Links could make this happen. Sadly, her mum's response was negative, but Lifelong Links were able to help her through the news and make contact with other family members and old friends.

Hannah has a relationship with one of her aunts and Lifelong Links re-introduced her to another aunt. Hannah and her aunt were also able to go on a trip together "down memory lane" to help her revisit places she had shared with her father and grandparents before they died.

Hannah now feels she has a trusted support network of people she had lost contact with. She says 'family means everything to me. I was born and raised to believe that family is strong and that they will always have your back no matter what'.

Hannah is passionate about the importance of care-experienced people having the opportunity to connect with their important relationships saying 'We as young people need this. We need this in our life. We need to make true connections and find our value'.

Staying Close, the role of the Personal Advisor and corporate parenting

Through the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026, we are strengthening the local offer for care leavers and will require each local authority to publish the arrangements it has in place to support and assist care leavers in their transition to adulthood and interdependent living. In implementing these measures, we will prioritise helping local authorities maintain and build enduring relationships in their service design and the objectives of their practitioners. We will set out how changes to the local offer should be done in September 2026, but it should include programmes which can support care leavers to develop networks of support as they move towards independence, alongside others in the same stage of their life journey.

Leaving care support should be scaled based on the needs of the individual young person. For those with significant needs we are rolling out the Staying Close programme – as a duty in the Act for local authorities to provide the right support to those who need it. Staying Close has been shown to have a positive impact on young people's wellbeing and sense of social connectedness³⁴. Staying Close will support local authorities to embed

³⁴ 6930454ad29ecc9c8f29816d_CHI_Staying_Close_Final_Evaluation_Report.pdf: https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/646dd81ef095aa13072c44e0/6930454ad29ecc9c8f29816d_CHI_Staying_Close_Final_Evaluation_Report.pdf

enduring relationships in their services, and we will provide further guidance on its implementation later this year.

We know that the right accommodation creates the conditions that enable ongoing access to support from peers and trusted adults. As announced in the government's strategy, A National Plan to End Homelessness published in December 2025, we will develop an action plan to reduce care leaver homelessness, which will include promoting programmes that help care leavers live in accommodation where they can form bonds and support one another as they transition into adulthood. The action plan will also be underpinned by a suite of evidence-based models such as rent guarantor schemes, supported lodgings and specialist support projects to give local authorities a richer menu of proven options that support relationship and reunification (where appropriate) based support.

The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026 also extends corporate parenting duties across all government departments and key public bodies including schools and colleges, Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission as well as health bodies and the Youth Justice Board. The duties will help level the playing field for children in care and care leavers who do not have the family support networks that their peers benefit from, so that every young person can achieve and thrive. In December 2025 we announced that tens of thousands of care leavers will receive free prescriptions, dental and eyecare services up to age 25 by the end of 2026. These changes come alongside pilots to improve mental health support for children in care and families and paid NHS internships for care leavers to boost children's life chances.

We want to go beyond public bodies too and reflect on the role that community, culture, and faith traditions could play in recognising the unique relationships care experienced young people take into adulthood. To achieve this, we will establish a dialogue with young people and adults with experience of care, faith and non-faith bodies. It will explore the development of a lifelong relationship ceremony that offers a meaningful, safe and inclusive way to celebrate and affirm intentional, non-biological bonds in adulthood, whether with a former foster carer, teacher mentor or another trusted and supportive adult.

This is a transformative change to how the public sector supports the most vulnerable children and young people in society, across all aspects of their lives, tackling the stigma and discrimination that they experience and supporting the renewed focus on enduring relationships.

4. Supporting enduring relationships with learning, accountability and inspection

As government supports the sector to turn attention to enduring relationships, we need every aspect of the system to share the same set of expectations for practice; that practitioners know, support and build networks of enduring relationships with children that will last into adulthood.

A new metric for enduring relationships

We will implement a measure of enduring relationships which will be aligned to the National Framework and will be included in the Children's Social Care Dashboard to promote learning, and Ofsted's inspection frameworks to drive accountability. The measure will be practice based, supporting the practitioner to have meaningful conversations with the child or young person to define and record those relationships which are:

- appropriate
- have the potential to endure
- provide trust, support and emotional resilience

We will work with a number of local authorities to determine the best validated tool to use for this metric that can then be embedded in care and pathway planning. Following co-design, we plan to roll out the metric at the end of this year. Data, like this measure, is essential for focussing minds, promoting learning, and bringing accountability for this shift to the system.

Inspection that focuses on what matters to children

We need to hold ourselves to the highest standards if we are turn to the tide on poor outcomes and see care making a genuine and positive difference to children and young people. Ofsted have a central role in holding local authorities and providers to account through inspection and regulation.

For local authorities, the Inspecting Local Authorities Children's Services Framework (ILACS) has been updated in 2026 to align with the government's children's social care reforms, including the recent publications of statutory guidance, Working Together to Safeguard Children 2026 and the Children's Social Care National Framework 2026.

Changes to ILACS this year already include a greater focus on family networks, high ambitions for children in care and care leavers, and challenging local authorities for the use of unlawful unregistered provision. Ofsted will engage with the sector throughout 2026 on a renewed children and families services framework for introduction in 2027. We are working closely with Ofsted so that any future inspection framework gives appropriate attention to enduring relationships for those in and leaving care.

For providers, including children's homes, secure settings, supported accommodation, and Independent Fostering Agencies, the Social Care Common Inspection Framework (SCCIF) has also been updated in 2026, to emphasise the importance of the practice in homes, not just process. Ofsted will also consult with the sector on bolder changes to the future of SCCIF throughout 2026 to ensure it backs measures in the policy programme. Providers need to be clear how they should support enduring relationships as part of the

care that they provide. This is not an optional extra when providing a home, but the core purpose of care, and providers will need to demonstrate creativity and tenacity in supporting children and young people and working with local authorities and partners.

Creating an improving system will require everyone to play their part. Ofsted are exploring opportunities to develop a cohort of Ofsted Peer Inspectors, first for SCCIF, and in due course for ILACS. These peers will offer their time and skills to work alongside Ofsted's inspectors, sharing their current practice expertise. Peers will gain important experience in how inspection operates and support inspectors so that everyone has a shared and up-to-date understanding of good practice.



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