

Email to CSCFramework.CONULTATION@education.gov.uk

Dear Colleagues

1. I am writing on behalf of the Esmée Fairbairn Leaving Care Learning Programme, which brings together 35 voluntary organisations across the UK to learn together in order to improve care leavers' outcomes.¹
2. I have submitted an online consultation response but for many of the answers 200 words was not sufficient, so this document builds on the online response, drawing on our experience of facilitating this voluntary sector learning programme, and of working with the National Care Leavers Benchmarking Forum to support practice improvement in Local Authorities.²

The purpose and intention of the Children's Social Care National Framework and Dashboard

3. We understand from reading the consultation document and attending DfE briefing sessions that the intention of the Framework and supporting Dashboard is to:
 - Set national direction for children's social care, including describing the outcomes that children's social care should achieve and setting out expectations for what leaders and practitioners in local authorities should do, with a view to raising the quality and improving the consistency of practice.
 - Mainstream learning and evidence, spreading a growing understanding of what works from investment in recent years.
 - Establish a stronger learning infrastructure and bring transparency to the system so that the impact of what happens in practice can be understood.
4. These are welcome objectives, but our experience of delivering a Learning Programme, comprising 35 voluntary organisations working with thousands of young people leaving care, is that just publishing outcomes, practice guides and indicators will not achieve this objective. Rather, learning about practice, and taking action to improve it, requires reflective conversations between practitioners, including those working in statutory partner agencies and the voluntary and community sector, and the opportunity to test new ways of working, in a safe and non-judgmental environment.
5. This is important because the Consultation document suggests that the National Framework will be used to inform conversations between local authorities and the DfE's regional improvement and support leads, and to inform Ofsted annual engagement meetings – in other words, it will form part of the LA performance management infrastructure. This risks the Framework and indicators being seen through a compliance lens, rather than a learning lens.

¹ <https://esmeefairbairn.org.uk/our-support/convening-and-connecting/leaving-care-funding-stream-learning-programme/>

² <https://www.catch-22.org.uk/news/improving-employability-care-experience/>

6. There has so far been limited information about what the proposed learning infrastructure will look like. Our recommendation is that it should be clearly distinct from the performance management process and provide the opportunity for ongoing peer learning in an environment in which it is acceptable to admit to less-than-perfect practice and be open to learning. We would be delighted to share our experience of facilitating such spaces with DfE colleagues.

Strengthening the expectation of multi-agency working

7. The role of the voluntary and community sector is only very briefly acknowledged in the National Framework, as one category on the list of partner agencies who work with local authorities and children's social care. However, voluntary and community organisations play a critical role in offering support to all children receiving support from children's social care and particularly to young people with care experience.
8. The sector is diverse and differentiated, including organisations:
 - Commissioned by local authorities to deliver statutory Leaving Care services, often alongside additional services which respond to the needs and wishes of young people.
 - Commissioned by local authorities for specific projects such as employability support, mentoring, specialist accommodation or creative Life Story work.
 - Dedicated care leaver organisations operating without any statutory funding.
 - Creative, sporting or youth organisations who may work with young people with care experience alongside other young people.
9. We think it would be helpful if the Principles section on partner agencies (p16 of the Consultation draft), could explicitly refer to the role of the voluntary and community sector, as there is a risk that the term agencies is interpreted as referring to statutory agencies only.
10. There is also a wider dimension to multi-agency working, which is that of community. The Care Review included the role of community in supporting young people with care experience to thrive in its statement of the purpose of children's social care and recommended a move away from "corporate parenting" to "community parenting", but this theme has received less attention in the Government's Response.
11. The "Spotlight Inquiry" carried out by All Party Parliamentary Group for Children in Care and Care Leavers heard from care leavers how community, friendships and a sense of place became increasingly important to them as they grew older.³
12. We recommend that the Principles that underpin children's social care practice should include a principle of recognising the value of community to young people, especially those leaving care, drawing on the conclusions from the Spotlight Inquiry.

³ <https://becomecharity.org.uk/become-the-movement/appg/spotlight-inquiry/>

Using the Dashboard to support continuous learning and improvement

13. We offer specific comments on the proposed Dashboard indicators below, but there are some general points we wish to make about the Dashboard approach. Firstly, whatever indicators are finally decided on, the DfE should consider collecting the Dashboard data in a way that reinforces anti-discriminatory practice, including collecting data to understand the experience of care leavers who:
- a. Arrived as unaccompanied asylum seeking children
 - b. Are from different racial and ethnic groups
 - c. Have an Education, Health & Care Plan
 - d. Have a mental health disorder/ are being treated by CAMHS
 - e. Identify as LGBTQ+
 - f. Are/have been in custody.
14. Secondly, a process to support continuous learning and improvement should integrate the type of information that can be captured in nationwide statistics, with survey information such as Coram Voice's Bright Spots⁴, and the voices of children, young people and families themselves. This approach has been recommended by the Office for Statistics Regulation⁵, is part of the implementation of the Scottish Independent Care Review⁶ and being explored by the Children's Information Project at Oxford University.⁷ The DfE should consider how it might facilitate (or commission) events and opportunities for analysts, leaders, practitioners and young people to come together to make sense of the data, and knowledge of practice on the ground, to drive priorities for improvement.
15. Finally, the DfE might consider whether learning and improvement would be more likely to take place if each local area was supported to develop a local Dashboard comprising a mix of national indicators, and locally identified and sourced information. This is the approach recommended by Professor Eileen Munro in her Review of Child Protection, featuring a "twin core" of data.⁸ This would allow national data sets to be supplemented by relevant available data, including management information and survey results, in each locality. An example of where this approach has worked well is the Greater Manchester Complex Safeguarding team, who have developed a bespoke data set across the 10 GMCA local authorities to inform regular practice conversations.

⁴ <https://coramvoice.org.uk/for-professionals/bright-spots/resource-bank/what-makes-life-good-care-leavers-views-on-their-well-being/>

⁵ <https://osr.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Visibility-Vulnerability-Voice-importance-including-children-young-people-official-statistics.pdf>

⁶ <https://thepromise.scot/the-promise-scotland/what-the-promise-scotland-does/change-projects/data/>

⁷ <https://oxfordnuffieldstrategic.web.ox.ac.uk/childrens-information/data-and-voice>,

⁸ [https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/munro-review-of-child-protection-final-report-a-child-centred-system\(p50\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/munro-review-of-child-protection-final-report-a-child-centred-system(p50)).

Outcomes, Practice & Indicators relating to young people with care experience

16. Our overall view is that we think it would be clearer if there was a separate Outcome and Indicator set for care leavers. It is unhelpful that just at the point that Ofsted have introduced a separate judgement, taking the view that the issues faced by this group are different, and there should be a specific focus on this group, the DfE is putting outcomes and indicators for those in care and leaving care together.

Outcome 2: children and young people are supported by their family network

17. In a separate Outcome and Indicator set, then some of the concepts currently in the narrative of Outcome 2 relating to family networks should be interpreted for this older age group. Contact with family is different for those with care experience, but it is of critical importance.
18. A study by the University of Bedfordshire⁹ indicated that 9% of care leavers returned to birth family after care, and the Bright Spots survey referred to in para 14, reported that 46% of care leavers received emotional support from a family member (including parents, siblings and grandparents). However, the issue is complex, as some care leavers may feel they have to return to family members because of the financial challenge of renting a home of their own, or because they do not feel safe in their care leaver accommodation.
19. It follows that supporting care leavers to build, or rebuild, positive relationships with their family network should be a responsibility of leaders and practitioners and should form part of the text around listening to the voice of children and young people.
20. Similarly, the planned development of care leaver indicators for loving relationships should include a basket of indicators relating to care leavers' relationships with their family networks. This could include the number & proportion of:
- Care leavers living with a family member, for whom this was a positive accommodation choice.
 - Care leavers in touch with one or more members of their family network.
 - Care leavers for whom a family-finding service such as "Lifelong Links" has been made available since their 18th birthday.
 - If and when available, care leavers with a lifelong guardianship order.
21. This data should be collected in a way that allows analysis of specific demographic groups (as described in para 13 above). It should also be collected in a way that allows analysis comparing care leavers who were previously in different types of care placement (eg foster care, residential care, secure care, placement with family etc).

⁹ (Munro E et al (2022) 'CCTC Final Report: Care Leavers' transitions to adulthood in the context of COVID-19'. Luton: University of Bedfordshire)

Outcome 4: children in care and care leavers have stable, loving homes

22. Looking at the **narrative** around Outcome 4 for care leavers, there should be more reference to the responsibilities of leaders and practitioners to support the 27% of care leavers who are former UASC. Leaders and practitioners should know the immigration status of their care leavers, have plans to resolve insecure status, and ensure continued support for care leavers with unresolved status. We support the comments that the Refugee & Migrant Children's Consortium have made on this section.
23. The sections for leaders & practitioners could include a positive statement about promoting care leavers' wellbeing, as well as addressing mental health concerns.
24. The section on listening to the voice of young people is lacking in specifics about how to hear the voice of care leavers. The recent "New Belongings" Project Final Report concluded that "The important lesson from New Belongings is that the value comes from working with young people locally to develop solutions that they feel will make the most difference to them."¹⁰ The Report also provides examples of effective ways to engage with this group. Other organisations such as Carefree Cornwall have experience of hearing the voices of care leavers in very rural areas.¹¹ We support the recommendation made in Coram Voice's response to the Consultation that there should be a "Mission 7" to ensure that children and young people have a voice in their own care and are enabled to exercise their right to be heard and participate in all levels of decision making.
25. Turning to the **proposed Dashboard indicators supporting Outcome 4**, while we note that additional indicators around loving relationships, friends/ people they can trust and employment, are planned, we nevertheless consider these indicators to lack ambition, and are of the view they do not reflect what we know matters to care leavers.
26. It is hugely disappointing that all of the outcomes that are proposed in this consultation document are the same as, or detailed subsets of, the first draft set of performance indicators for Children's Social Services, published in 1999. In other words, despite nearly twenty-five years of investment, legislation, guidance and support for young people with care experience, and the Government's Response to the Care Review describing this as a "once in a generation opportunity to reset children's social care", the outcomes that are to be measured date from the previous generation, before the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000, the Children & Families Act (2014), the cross-government "Keep on Caring" Strategy published in 2016, and initiatives which have been proved to have impact such as Staying Put and Staying Close.
27. The impact of the proposal to have such a limited set of indicators is to undermine the objective of the National Framework to improve the quality and consistency of practice.

¹⁰ <https://coramvoice.org.uk/for-professionals/bright-spots/resource-bank/new-belongings-final-report/>.

¹¹ <https://carefreecornwall.org.uk/>

If the Dashboard provides only a partial description of what matters to young people leaving care, then the conversation around improving practice will also be partial.

28. Firstly, the proposed indicator set does not cover the change programme set out in the Government's response to the Independent Care Review, such as the proposals to support family-finding, befriending and mentoring programmes, improve the quality of the offer from HE institutions, extend Staying Close and Staying Put, reduce care leaver homelessness, and improve the response of Mental Health services. Other indicators relating to the Care Review Missions for Care Leavers could include:
- How care leavers feel about their home (eg p33 of the Bright Spots Survey¹²).
 - The experience and progress of care leavers in Higher Education (NNECL¹³ are working to have this data included in the National Student Survey).
 - Indicators on employment which are wider than just apprenticeships. Our experience in supporting young people towards employment is that apprenticeships are not appropriate for every care leaver.¹⁴
29. Secondly, the proposed indicator set does not reflect what we have learnt over the past twenty years about what makes life good for young people with care experience. A priority should be to include "subjective wellbeing" indicators such as those in Coram Voice's Bright Spots survey. These ask:
- a. Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?
 - b. Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?
 - c. How happy did you feel yesterday?
 - d. How anxious did you feel yesterday?
30. These questions are included in the ONS wellbeing survey, so the data collection methodology is already well established, and results can be benchmarked against the general population. The Bright Spots survey also includes a rich range of other indicators on issues which care leavers consider important, such as having goals and plans for the future, coping financially, and not being lonely. These could inform national and local Dashboards, and lead to much more rounded learning and improvement conversations.
31. Finally, any data collection should allow analysis by specific groups, as described in para 13 above.

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¹² p86 in <https://coramvoice.org.uk/for-professionals/bright-spots/resource-bank/what-makes-life-good-care-leavers-views-on-their-well-being/>).

¹³ <https://www.nnecl.org/>

¹⁴ <https://www.catch-22.org.uk/news/improving-employability-care-experience/>